

Author's Note: to anybody reading, no, this is NOT the original first chapter of Renegade Cause. Frankly, after a lot of consideration, I felt that the chapter needed a significant bit of editing to fit the rest of the characterization of the story. There are no major changes regarding the plot, but just a few dialogue changes that make the chapter a bit stronger.

The Ministry will be calling at your place to destroy your wand...

Harry swallowed hard. This was it. He should have seen this coming. He knew what he did would bring the Ministry down on him – hard.

He turned towards the stairs, his mind a blur. He was leaving Privet Drive, he knew that, but he only knew one thing: he needed his wand.

“Damnit, come back here, boy!” Uncle Vernon roared, trying to put himself in front of Harry, but with a flick, the beefy man was thrown aside.

“Stay out of my way,” Harry said coldly, moving towards the stairs, even as Uncle Vernon was scrabbling to his feet, his eyes blazing with rage. “The school’s thrown me out, and I can do whatever the hell I want. So I’m leaving. Now.” And with that, completely ignoring Uncle Vernon’s bellowed protests, he went straight upstairs and slammed the door to his room shut.

His nerves were on the edge of panic, but he knew he didn’t have time for that. If the Ministry was coming to destroy his wand, he guessed they would be coming soon. He couldn’t afford to wait. Even if Dumbledore could sort something out – and given no more letters had arrived, that probably wouldn’t happen – he still didn’t like to think of the prospect of dueling with Ministry officials.

He was loading his trunk faster than any other time in his life. Clothes, homework, everything landed in a tumbled mess inside, but Harry didn’t care. I need to be moving, they’re likely coming!

Cramming Hedwig’s cage inside and wrenching his trunk shut, he turned towards the door and shoved it open. Awkwardly dragging the trunk, he could still hear yelling in the kitchen, probably between Aunt

Petunia and Uncle Vernon. She must be trying to convince him not to get in my way, Harry thought with a disgusted snort. Smart move for once, Petunia.

Then he heard the doorbell ring.

Oh shit, they're here! "Don't answer it!" Harry yelled as Uncle Vernon entered the hall. "I'm warning you, don't answer –"

He opened the door, and even from Harry's vantage point at the top of the stairs, he could see two grim-faced men in crisp black robes.

"Where's the Potter boy?"

"There's no Potter living at this residence," Uncle Vernon growled. "Now get off my property, you, you freaks!"

But the Ministry officials had already seen Harry. "We need to take that young man into custody for the illegal usage of the Patronus Charm in plain sight of a Muggle. If you'd step aside, sir..."

"REDUCTO!"

Harry's spell did exactly what he wanted, striking the hallway mirror and causing it to explode into a cloud of glass shards. He could hear the Ministry officials swearing as they were engulfed in the cloud of glass.

But Harry wasn't stopping for anything, not now. His survival instinct had kicked in, and he knew he was going to have to fight. Two Stunning Spells dropped the Ministry officials and quickly bewitching his trunk to feather lightness, Harry hurtled down the stairs, clenching his eyes shut. He felt his trunk hurtle by him (clipping one of the falling Ministry officials on the way out the door, from the sounds of it), but he felt a hand seize his shoulder.

"You aren't leaving yet, boy –"

"Confundo!" Harry yelled, blindly pointing his wand back at Uncle Vernon, at the same time kicking backwards with his foot. From the

startled groan, Harry knew he hit something valuable, and the instant the grip slackened, Harry was out, seizing his trunk drifting on the front steps.

He knew any second that Ministry officials would come to investigate. Got to act fast, he thought wildly, pulling his trunk behind him as he ran. Need to find some place to run or hide to...

It came to him, as he remembered the last time he had run away from the Dursleys. He darted into a rubbish-strewn back alley between two of the smaller houses and ripped open his trunk. Yanking his Firebolt free, he muttered a quick Shrinking Charm on the trunk until it was the size of his wallet. Then, swallowing hard, he shoved his trunk into his pocket, mounted his broom, and shot off into the sky.

* * *

There was panic in Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"You're meaning to tell me that Harry is gone?" Sirius Black said in a low, rage-filled voice. "Gone, Arthur? Where the hell did he go?"

"I have no idea where he went, Sirius!" Mr. Weasley replied furiously. "Dumbledore was just making it to the Ministry when Fudge dispatched the people. While Dumbledore was arguing with Fudge, two reports came in that the Ministry officials had been stunned, his Muggle uncle was Confunded and that Harry was gone!"

"Doesn't Dumbledore have a Tracking Charm permanently placed on the boy for these kinds of problems?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked heatedly.

"Honestly, considering what the boy's been through, it only makes sense!"

"It might make sense, but it doesn't mean it's been done," Severus Snape replied, a hint of a sneer on his face. "What the hell was the idiotic boy thinking, using a Patronus Charm in plain sight of a Muggle?"

“He wouldn’t have done it without a reason,” Remus Lupin said, a worried note in his voice. “And that means the worst – the Ministry doesn’t control the Dementors anymore.”

“That’s an issue for another time, Lupin,” Mr. Weasley said quickly. “We need to find Harry. Does anyone have ideas where he might be?”

At this point, Fred and George, who were both listening with wide eyes at the top of the staircase, looked at each other with realization. They both knew exactly where Harry was going. Quickly winding up their Extendable Ears, they hammered on the door.

“We know where Harry’s going, let us in!” George shouted.

The door was pulled open by Kingsley in a second, mission integrity forgotten. “What do you two want?” he asked, his eyes slightly widening. “And how on earth were you listening at the door?”

“Boys,” Mr. Weasley said in a frustrated voice. “Now’s not the time –”

“We know where Harry’s going!” they shouted at the same time.

“And how on earth would you know that?” Snape snarled.

“Simple. He’s going to the Burrow,” Fred said, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s the logical explanation. Why on earth wouldn’t he – he thinks we’re all there, and that since Dad works at the Ministry...”

“I’m going,” Sirius said, getting to his feet, but with two loud cracks, the twins had already Disapparated.

Mr. Weasley was on his feet. “Where do you think –”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Snape drawled. “They probably went to the Burrow to rescue Potter – and share his sentence.”

Mr. Weasley looked like he was about to strangle Severus, but Kingsley stepped in. “I’ll go after them,” he said coolly. “Besides, I have an idea how we might be able to get Harry out of this.”

"I'm coming too, then," Sirius said firmly, pulling on his cloak. "Where exactly is the Burrow –"

"No, you're not," Kingsley snapped. "You know what Dumbledore said, and just because Harry hasn't listened to your letters telling him not to act rashly does not mean you should instead."

"Please, Sirius," Remus said quietly. "Let Kingsley handle it."

Sirius seemed to slump with defeat, while Kingsley gave Snape (who was smugly smiling) a disgusted look and Disapparated with a loud crack.

* * *

Harry clenched his teeth against the icy wind, wishing that he had grabbed a coat before leaving the house. He was flying high – higher than he had ever flown before – and was pushing his Firebolt to the limit.

But a quick glance behind him told him everything he needed to know. Three fliers, all on slower brooms, all brandishing wands.

Swallowing hard, Harry threw his broom into a sharp dive. The frigid air tore against his glasses as he accelerated, the wind tousling his hair and tugging at his cloak. He knew the Firebolt was the fastest broom in the world, but no matter the lead he could get on his chasers, he knew that lead would be lost as soon as he tried to land. I need to eliminate at least one of them, he thought, a chill running down his spine as he easily pulled out of the dive a hundred meters down. And I need to do it soon – the more time I spend in the air, the more time they have to call for reinforcements...

He heard a shrill whistle behind him, closer this time. Looking back quickly, he saw to his dismay that yet another flier had joined his pursuer. From the look of things, he's riding one of the better Nimbuses too...

Harry started to sweat as he flew faster and faster, pushing the Firebolt to accelerate. I need to get rid of this guy somehow before the rest of these idiots get the right idea and get on Nimbuses too!

Suddenly, he heard a low drone erupt through the air. His broom began to shake strangely, and Harry gripped the fragile wood even tighter. He had never really felt anything like this before, although he had a very shrewd – and very terrifying – idea about what it could be...

It erupted through the low clouds like a monolithic heavenly stalagmite, soaring upwards on a long flat arc towards the night sky. Harry's eyes widened as he heard the roar grow louder and louder. He could feel the air rushing around it, the slipstream ripping through the sky like the fabric of reality being torn with a long, flat knife.

In a second, Harry knew what he had to do. If this doesn't kill me, it'll be a miracle... Wrenching his broom downwards towards the brightly lit monstrosity, he dove directly into the slipstream by its left wing.

Harry had never played Quidditch in a hurricane (although the match in his third year might have come close), but as the roar tore through his eardrums and he could feel his very skull vibrating inside his head, he imagined that this would probably be close, if not worse. It was a challenge to even hold onto his broom as it quaked in his hand. The lights around the monstrosity blurred, and he felt tears come to his eyes despite the glasses pressed to his face. Just a few seconds longer...

He heard three loud bangs and a brutally cut-off scream, and the white monstrosity jerked in the sky. Harry's eyes went wide as the slipstream shifted violently –

His numb hands were pulled free of the broomstick handle, and Harry could only tumble in the air as his Firebolt soared out of his hands, beginning to fall on a long arc towards the ground...

Harry struggled for his wand even as he fell. Finally wrenching it free and keeping a hand tightly around his shirt (which, given its looseness, was violently fluttering around his thin body) he pointed at

the thin silhouette of the broom and bellowed the words he had shouted not a year earlier.

“Accio Firebolt!”

The broom froze in midair as Harry struggled to concentrate. Come on, I’m only free-falling through the air, not facing a psychotic Hungarian Horntail. I... can... do this!

He felt the slick wood of the Firebolt under his hand. Grabbing on frantically, he stuffed his wand back into his pocket and rocketed through the air, heading south-east towards Ottery St. Catchpole. He knew that Ron and Hermione were bound to be there, and surely someone would be able to help...

For a second, he wondered if Mr. Weasley would have him arrested for what he did, but he brushed it aside. He knows that what I did was right. He knows that the Ministry’s got no right to destroy my wand...

He dove lower and lower darting towards the trees on the outskirts of the town. Chancing a glance behind him, Harry noticed with a degree of relief that his pursuers were finally gone. I must have lost them in that stunt earlier, unless...

He remembered the scream that had split the air, and he could suddenly feel the warm stickiness on the back of his t-shirt, nearly dried from the long flight. He felt sick – really sick – as he imagined where that stain could have come from.

No time to think about that now, there’s the Burrow! He decelerated quickly as he dove towards the garden, but not quickly enough to avoid kicking up a sizable heap of dirt and grass beneath his shoes as he hit the ground hard. Dropping into a roll, he came up quickly, wiping the dirt and mud from his face and Firebolt.

To his surprise, none of the lights seemed to be on. He frowned as he approached the front door and hammered on it. Where the hell did they all go... unless...

“All right, drop the broom and wand, Potter, the game’s up.”

Harry spun quickly, only to see six grim-faced Ministry officials standing on the lawn, all with their wands pointing at Harry. He swallowed hard, despite himself.

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” he said, clenching his jaw. “I was attacked by a Dementor, my cousin and me, and I had to use the charm to escape.”

“You didn’t use the Patronus Charm to escape us, did you?” the lead officer sneered. Harry was reminded strongly of an enraged tiger from his feline motions and feral gaze, not to mention his violently orange hair, just a few shades lighter than that of the Weasleys. “You left quite a body count tonight, Potter.”

Harry inched back towards the door, praying that it was unlocked. If I can just get inside, they’ll have to fight me coming in, and I’ll have the advantage, at least until they bring reinforcements...

“So Potter, under Wizengamot statutes, I’m afraid I’m going to have to place you under arrest for reckless endangerment, violations of the Statute of Secrecy, and manslaughter for the unfortunate deaths of my men in that –”

Harry wasn’t listening anymore. Spinning around, he wrenched open the door –

Only to see a big bald black man step out of the shadows and disarm Harry with a flick of his wand. Harry, panicking now, began to pull himself onto his broom, but that flew out of his hands a second later.

“That’s okay, Kemester,” the man said in a slow voice, seizing Harry’s arm in a painful grip. Harry began to thrash, but with quick efficient motions, his arms were pinned behind his back. “The Aurors will take it from here. This is out of Magical Law Enforcement’s hands now.”

The lead officer purpled with fury. “This brat was responsible for murder, Shackbolt, and you expect us to just let him go?”

“Take it up with Scrimgeour if you want to press charges, but the Auror department has a vested interest in making sure this boy is disciplined, so we’ll handle it from here,” Shacklebolt replied coolly. “It might interest you to know, that –”

There was a sudden loud explosion from behind the hedges that surrounded the Burrow, one that made a dozen gnomes topple out and the Ministry officers dive for cover. A thick plume of orange fire erupted into the air, and Harry could only watch in shock as the nearby stump exploded as well.

Harry could have sworn that the man behind him was smiling tightly, but a second later, the Auror spun on his heel.

All around him, he felt as if everything was being pushed in and compressed. His ears, his chest, even his eyes felt like they were going to painfully implode as he was squeezed...

There was a loud pop, and Harry reappeared on a dirty London street, gasping and choking, the black man still with a firm grip on his arm.

“Come on,” the man said icily, shoving a small scrap of paper under his nose. “Read and memorize – now.”

Harry was about to protest, but at the look of sheer emotionless implacability on the man’s face, he turned towards the paper and read quickly.

“The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix can be found at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London,” Harry read aloud, turning up to the stern Auror. “What is this? What is –”

But before Harry’s astonished eyes, a doorway, followed by an entire grimy house erupted from between the two nearest houses on the block. Harry was about to ask how the hell this had happened, but Shacklebolt was already moving, dragging Harry up the path and through the door before he could even speak.

The door clicked shut behind them, and Harry could barely see as Shacklebolt continued to pull him down a flight of stairs and...

“Harry! By Merlin, it’s him!”

Harry could barely even protest as a man with long black hair flung his arms around him, shaking with relief. Harry could see a dozen other people in the room, all with very grim expressions on their faces. Fred and George, though, seemed to be grinning rather widely at the sight of Harry, and gave him a thumbs-up the second that he caught their eyes.

“I’m okay, Sirius, it’s all right,” Harry muttered, stepping away and leaning against a chair in exhaustion. He had been flying all night, and he could barely stand straight.

“You’re not all right, you’re covered in blood!” Lupin said, his eyes widening at the sight of the back of Harry’s shirt.

“So that’s what it was,” Harry remarked, smiling weakly. His grin vanished instantly at the sight of the grim looks on the faces of Mr. Weasley, Shacklebolt, and McGonagall, not to mention the furious look on Snape’s pallid visage.

“Sit down, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said quietly. “We have a lot to talk about, and you have an explanation to give us. Dumbledore’s on his way – he just finished speaking with the Minister.”

Harry uncertainly sat down in the empty seat, trying to ignore how all of the people in the room were watching him. I did what I thought was right, he thought to himself sternly. They’ve got no right to be angry with me – sure, what I did was dangerous, but the Ministry was going to take my wand! It was a survival instinct!

There was a loud slam, and Harry turned to see Dumbledore walking down the stairs, a steely look in his eyes. Harry swallowed hard, despite himself. He had rarely seen Dumbledore look so relieved – and frustrated – before.

There was a long silence where Sirius approached a side counter – apparently, they were all sitting in the kitchen of wherever the hell he was – and pulled out a few bottles. “Can I get anyone anything?”

"No thank you, Sirius," Dumbledore replied quietly, his eyes only on Harry. "I must applaud you, though – you exercised considerable restraint tonight, and I am quite proud."

Sirius grinned, despite himself. "As long as Harry's okay, I'm... I'm fine." There was a slightly strained quality to the man's voice, but Harry ignored it, even as a sick sense of fear flooded through his nerves. I was justified in what I did, he thought to himself. I was justified...

"I am very relieved, Harry, that you are here safely," Dumbledore said finally. "Kingsley and the twins did a fine job of convincing the Ministry that you are in the hands of the Auror department, and of that I am proud."

"How did you like the explosions, Harry?" Fred asked eagerly.

"Nice ones, Fred. Quite impressive," Harry replied with a trace of grin. "Your own fireworks?"

George shrugged. "A few, here and there."

"But that is not the point, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly, sitting himself at the end of the table, opposite Harry. "Why did you leave your aunt and uncle's house, after you were expressly told not to?"

"Nobody ever told me that," Harry said quickly, his gut feeling like ice.

"Didn't Mrs. Arabella Figg tell you to stay indoors?" Dumbledore said quietly. "Did she not say she had instructions from me?"

"She might have... look, the Ministry was already there before you could do anything!" Harry replied angrily, glaring at Dumbledore. "They were going to snap my wand in half! And I was innocent!"

"You still should not have left the house, Harry," Dumbledore said disapprovingly. "Because of that, you led four officers into a chase that resulted in their deaths. What were you thinking, Harry, by that maneuver with the aeroplane? It was dangerously reckless and you

could have been easily killed. And though I understand your panic, your actions put you in incredible danger.”

“I wasn’t killed, though,” Harry pointed out in an icy tone. “I’m right here – I’m safe.”

“You may have a great of confidence in your reckless behavior and ability on a broomstick, but that does not mean you should not have contacted us,” Dumbledore said, a restrained note of worry in his voice.

“And how was I supposed to do that?” Harry snarled, getting to his feet. “Hedwig was gone, and I don’t know how to send messages with Patronuses, so how exactly was I supposed to contact you?”

“Please sit down, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly, “and we can discuss how we can salvage this situation and avoid the legal consequences –”

His temper, which had only been rising all summer due to the lack of good information and the fact that he had been ignored, nearly exploded, but the last words out of Dumbledore’s mouth punctured his fury, and he froze in midstride.

“Legal consequences?”

“Sit down, Harry,” Dumbledore said again. “Please – we don’t have much time.”

“Harry, calm down, please,” Sirius said, putting his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I know you’re upset, but the Ministry’s going to move fast, and we need every break we’ve got to be able to respond.”

If it weren’t for the Dementors, Sirius, I wouldn’t have even been able to leave Privet Drive, Harry thought darkly, moving back to his seat. Even though you’re probably proud – I did exactly what you would have done...

“Professor Dumbledore, Potter’s ego has gotten the better of him, once again,” Snape said coolly, crossing his arms over his chest,

“and I fear that his most recent actions may prompt the Dark Lord himself to act –”

“And you’d know that how, Snape?” Harry snapped, unable to bite back the comment. “Gone back to your roots, have you?”

“Harry, that’s enough,” Dumbledore said firmly. “You are in a great deal of danger right now, and it would be in your best interest to be aware of it. Now please apologize to Professor Snape.”

Harry clenched his fist. “I want my wand. Tell that Auror Shacklebolt to give my wand back to me and I’ll cooperate.”

“Kingsley, give him back his wand,” Dumbledore said quietly, sitting back down. With a deeply mistrustful look, Shacklebolt slid Harry’s wand towards him.

“Now please apologize to Professor Snape,” Dumbledore said firmly.

Harry snorted. “When that man deserves my apology, he can get it.”

Snape nearly rose his feet, indignity and disgust on his face, but Shacklebolt shoved him sharply back down. The sallow-faced professor threw a disgusted glare at Harry, which he returned in full force.

“Now Harry, two of those officers received crippling injuries from your attack, Harry at Privet Drive,” Dumbledore said, steel in his voice now. “They’re currently in St. Mungo’s as healers try to remove shards of glass from their eyes. And from Kingsley’s reporting, the four Hit Wizards that were pursuing you were killed.”

“The bloodstains on your shirt testify to that,” Shacklebolt muttered. “We’ll have to make sure that doesn’t get into evidence...”

“This is going to look very bad, especially with the way the Daily Prophet’s been portraying you,” Mr. Weasley said quietly. “Four people died chasing you tonight Harry – four people with families and lives apart from yours. How do you think those people are going to feel towards you?”

Harry felt a chill weight of guilt settle in his stomach, but he ignored it. "I was doing what I had to do. That was the only way I thought I could lose them. I didn't think they'd... wait, what has the Prophet been saying about me?"

"Haven't you been reading it?" Lupin asked incredulously.

"Not cover-to-cover," Harry replied defensively. "I mean, if there was something about Voldemort, wouldn't they put that on the front page?"

"Normally they would, but they'll have a nice big cover tomorrow," Snape sneered. "'Four Ministry Officials Killed Pursuing Harry Potter.'"

"Shut... up... Snape," Sirius said through gritted teeth. "Harry doesn't need this."

"Harry, your name has been mentioned in the paper several times," Dumbledore said quietly, "and they have not been complimentary. Despite the fact that Miss Skeeter is no longer writing for the Prophet, they have been building upon the material, and her headline 'Harry Potter, Disturbed and Dangerous' becomes unfortunately applicable here."

"I'm not disturbed, but I can sure as hell be dangerous," Harry growled, visualizing for a second the Daily Prophet printing shop in Diagon Alley next to Gringotts going up in flames. "How can they get away with that?"

"Very easily when they can haul away four bodies and two injured," Shacklebolt said grimly. "Harry, they want you in for manslaughter now. These charges aren't just a breach of the Statute of Secrecy and having you expelled or face a hearing. They want you in Azkaban."

Harry felt a chill go down his spine. "I'm not going to Azkaban. I had just cause for what I did."

“Right now, the Ministry would be a lot more inclined to believe the words of Dmitri Kemester than you, Mr. Potter,” Shacklebolt said icily. “He’s the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and his brother reportedly got decapitated following you in the little stunt you did. He was on the Nimbus. The other three just fell to their deaths.”

Harry swallowed hard. “I didn’t mean for anyone to die. It’s not my fault – hell, they chose to chase me!”

“The Prophet will not paint it like that, though,” Dumbledore replied heavily. “They will say that you were responsible for their deaths, and that you need to be brought to justice. This will discredit you even further, and there will be many a warrant calling for your arrest.”

Harry’s hands were shaking now. “Will I... will I be allowed to go back to Hogwarts?”

“Yes, you will,” Dumbledore said, ignoring the furious look on Snape’s face, “for I understand what you have done. Although I disapprove of your method, the fact remains that you are now safe, and we must deal with this matter however we can. You saved your cousin by your Patronus Charm, and if Mundungus Fletcher had informed me of this more quickly, I could have intervened and you would never have had to flee and get involved in this affair.”

“But won’t the Ministry –”

“The Ministry has no legitimate authority over the way I run Hogwarts,” Dumbledore replied, steel in his voice. “They may be angry, but your education is very important, and in this climate, Hogwarts offers some of the best protection we have against Lord Voldemort. However, you will not be leaving this house this summer, not until your name is cleared. We may have a way to get you off, but that involves a discussion with Rufus Scrimgeour, the Head of the Auror Department of the Ministry of Magic.”

Harry rubbed his temple. “When’s the Prophet going to hear about this?”

“They already know,” Lupin said softly.

Harry sighed heavily. “Damn it. What about Voldemort?”

Sirius quickly exchanged a look with Dumbledore, who quickly nodded. “This does work to his advantage. Not many people believed you going the first time when you said Voldemort was back,” Sirius said with disgust. “Skeeter did a good job blackening your reputation even then – hell, she convinced the Minister pretty damned well. Now, with this...”

“You’ll be lucky if your fellow Gryffindors listen to a word you say, Potter,” Snape spat.

“Like I need your opinion,” Harry snarled. “So, in other words, I’m in more danger than ever?”

“Most likely,” Dumbledore said grimly.

“Wonderful,” Harry muttered with disgust, consigning the Potions professor and the Ministry of Magic to the deepest hell he could think of. “So where am I, anyways? Can the Ministry get in here?”

“This is the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” Dumbledore said softly, “a resistance organization that I started in the last war against Voldemort and his Death Eaters.”

“It’s also my dad’s old house,” Sirius said, sliding into a chair and shoving his long hair out of his face. “It fell to me after my parents died, and I’m stuck here too, since Wormtail told Voldemort I’m an Animagus. Can’t do much for the Order from here.”

“Ron and Hermione are here?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Weasley replied.

“Why couldn’t they tell me anything this summer? I mean, why hasn’t Voldemort done anything?” Harry looked around the table in confusion. “I haven’t seen anything in the Prophet all summer – not that I’d trust them to tell anything.”

“That’s because the Dark Lord hasn’t done anything,” Snape growled. “He’s been lying low, working on his private plans, some that I’m not even privy to.”

Harry rolled his eyes with disgust. “I’m assuming one of those plans involves getting rid of me? I mean, I did humiliate him pretty badly a month or so back.”

“Unfortunately, the Ministry will have the same idea, thanks to what happened last night,” Shacklebolt said darkly. “You’re in more danger now than you’ve ever been, Potter.”

“Unfortunately, Kingsley is quite right – more even than he realizes,” Dumbledore said quietly, getting to his feet. “I’d ask that all of you leave the room with the exception of Harry. I need to tell him something very important.”

Silently, they all got up and left. Both Sirius and Lupin patted Harry hesitantly on the shoulder as they left the room, closing the door tightly behind them. Dumbledore, for his part, approached the counter and withdrew a basin from a cupboard.

“I was hoping that I would not have to do this,” Dumbledore said heavily, a hint of sadness in his voice, “but with both the Ministry and Voldemort actively set against you, we must accelerate our plans, and we cannot afford to wait.”

Harry eyed the basin suspiciously. “What are you talking about, Professor?”

“Have you ever wondered why I never told you why Voldemort wanted to kill you when you were a baby?” Dumbledore drew his wand and slowly put it to his temple. To Harry’s astonishment, he withdrew a long silvery strand from his temple and directed it into the basin.

“Is that... a Pensieve?” Harry asked curiously.

"It was," Dumbledore replied, "one belonging to Orion Black, Sirius' father. It was emptied at some point, and assumed a cooking pot. Of course, the first time I saw Molly making stew in it, I knew what it really was."

Harry thought about Dumbledore's question. After a few seconds, he clenched his fist with repressed anger. "Yeah, I've wondered why you've never told me."

"I was putting off telling you for as long as possible, Harry, because I did not want to lay this burden on you, especially at your stage of life," Dumbledore said, lightly stirring the thought in the basin. It looked rather pitiful, sitting at the bottom like a long strand of wet smoke, but Dumbledore stirred it just the same. "But given the events tonight, the blood on your hands —"

"I did what I had to do," Harry growled, his eyes burning.

"Exactly," Dumbledore said, "and that is why I believe you are ready to know the truth. Look into the basin, Harry, and you will see the truth, dark though it may be."

Outside of the kitchen, Kingsley seethed with anger.

He had kept himself under control during the meeting, but there was a limit even to his patience. Despite Harry Potter's vaunted status that Dumbledore continually touted, this time a line had been crossed. That boy caused four Ministry officials to die, and Dumbledore expects to get him off with a slap on the wrist? Not if I have anything to say about it...

He saw Snape standing against the wall, glaring daggers at Lupin and Sirius, who were talking in low voices. And it looks like I'm not the only one who's angry, Kingsley thought with a raised eyebrow.

Sirius finally looked over at the Potions professor. "Got a reason to stay, Snape?"

"I'm waiting for Dumbledore," Snape replied shortly, his eyes narrowing. "This cannot wait."

Sirius gritted his teeth. "I'm sure it can't, Snape, but Harry's more important than your little report, so why don't you just darken someone else's hallway?"

"Is there a problem, Snape?" Kingsley asked coolly. "Is Voldemort on the move?"

"The Dark Lord's plans are always in motion, and I'm sure that Potter's little escapade," Snape sneered, "will allow him more room to maneuver – more room than any of us would have liked."

"Harry did what he had to do," Sirius said, a hard edge in his voice. "He was scared, he wasn't thinking –"

"He doesn't do a lot of that," Snape spat.

"Snivellus, you make one more crack about my godson, and I swear _"

“Sirius, Snape has a point here,” Kingsley interrupted. “People are dead because of his actions, reckless and negligent as they were. The fact he shows little to no remorse is even more worrying, especially if Dumbledore continues to label him as our ‘greatest hope.’”

“Kingsley, he regrets what he did,” Lupin said quietly. “Couldn’t you see –”

“I know what I saw and heard,” Kingsley said darkly, “and from everything Dumbledore’s said, it wasn’t what I expected of him. And like it or not, you can’t argue the fact that people are dead, and Potter will need to own up to that. He shouldn’t get off just because he’s the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Severus smirked with cool triumph, while Lupin and Sirius just looked shocked at Kingsley’s statement.

“I’m sure Dumbledore knows –”

“From what I saw in there, I’m sure Dumbledore’s going to do his best to make sure Potter gets off scot-free – not that he can do much right now, given his stature in the Ministry,” Kingsley growled, his patience already stretching. “Remus, even you can’t justify murder.”

“So you want him tried in the open court?” Sirius asked, incredulity and anger in his voice. “They’d rip him apart – they’d send him to Azkaban!”

“I’m talking with Scrimgeour in the morning after I have a few words with Potter,” Kingsley said sharply, “and he’s going to a hearing of some sort, no question about that. I have a responsibility to my Department – I got him here, and it’s my responsibility that at least some justice is served. I’m going to try and keep this in the Auror Department and out of Magical Law Enforcement. A trial with one of their prosecutors would be nasty – and very public, and that’s bad for all of us, not just Potter. If I can make it like a military tribunal in a typical Auror trial, Potter stands a better chance of getting out of this without a stint in Azkaban.”

“So you don’t want Harry to go to Azkaban, or you do?” Sirius asked, narrowing his eyes. “Whose side are you on, Kingsley?”

“I want a court to decide this, but I also don’t want to see a fifteen year old boy go to Azkaban, particularly one who might be our only chance to defeat Voldemort,” Kingsley snapped back, his patience nearly gone. “And I’ve got a better chance of making that happen than if Dumbledore stepped in – you know Fudge’s opinion of him right now.”

“How much influence do you have with Scrimgeour?” Lupin asked slowly.

Kingsley snorted. “Not enough to persuade the man to let Harry off, if that’s what you’re asking for.”

Lupin bit his lip. “Look, Kingsley, we’re both on the same side here, and Harry does need to take responsibility for his actions, but dragging him into the Ministry makes him a target –”

“He was a target from the beginning,” Snape spat caustically. “Not that he cares – oh no, he keeps wandering straight into dangerous territory like his conceited father –”

Sirius took a step forward, fury burning on his face. Lupin grabbed his shoulder warningly, but Sirius didn’t care. “I told you, Snivellus, if you dare make another crack about my godson –”

“You can’t deny, Sirius, that Harry’s been in more trouble than he should,” Lupin said in a low voice. “And he’s just like James in that regard –”

“It doesn’t mean he deserves Azkaban!” Sirius snarled. “I’ve been in there, Remus! I know what it’s like – and Harry’s supposed to be the one that saves us! He did what he had to do –”

The door cracked open. A narrow stream of light briefly lit the tiny hallway before Harry stepped out of the room, a haggard and weary

look on his face. Kingsley was a bit startled by the new haunted look in Harry's eyes – along with something else, something more emotion-driven, something angrier...

Dumbledore was right behind Harry. "We've finished. It's been a long night, and I have a meeting with the Minister early tomorrow morning." He sighed tiredly, and Kingsley was astonished to see how tired Dumbledore appeared up close.

Snape stepped forward, and Harry's eyes snapped up, fixing on Snape with an expression of complete and utter hatred. He opened his mouth to speak, but Snape smoothly ignored him. "Headmaster, I have a quick report I must give before you leave. May we..."

"Of course, Severus," Dumbledore replied wearily, and the two ascended up the stairs, talking in low voices. Harry, looking around slowly, still glaring with fury at the sallow-faced man, began to ascend the stairs towards the remaining three men.

"Potter, I want a word," Kingsley said in a low voice.

Harry ignored him, continuing towards the stairwell that led to the upper stories.

"Harry, Kingsley wants to talk to you," Lupin said quietly.

"Not now... I don't care..."

Kingsley's patience snapped. He doesn't care what I have to say, even after what I'm trying to do for him? The ungrateful little... Grabbing Harry's bloodstained shirt, he forced him roughly against the wall, a rare flash of anger on his normally calm face.

"What do you think –"

"Potter, be quiet," Kingsley said in a low growl, ignoring Sirius' furious bellow as Lupin held him back. "Look at me and listen carefully. Look at me, Potter!"

Harry's gaze, which had been wandering, finally snapped to the Auror's face, and Severus saw the haunted look vanish behind a mask of indifference and cold anger. It's almost like looking at Snape, but with more actual rage and less sarcasm...

"What do you want to say?" Harry growled. "I've had a trying night, and I need some sleep."

"I'll make this brief, then," Kingsley snarled in a low voice. "You need to start treating me – someone, who is only helping you because you're the one who's supposed to kill Voldemort – with some respect. Despite whatever Dumbledore said, you're going to a hearing as soon as I can set the arrangements. You're lucky I'm a reasonable man and I know what it's like to do things you'd rather not do in the heat of the moment, but that doesn't mean you're getting out of this scot-free, Harry. There will be justice for those deaths, for which you have some responsibility, and the only reason you're here with the Order instead of with Magical Law Enforcement is because I was there. Otherwise, you'd be getting far worse treatment – hell, you'd probably be in an Azkaban holding cell tonight."

Harry glared at him, breathing through clenched teeth. "I appreciate your help, but –"

"Don't lie to me, Potter, because you'd treat people who help you with more respect if you truly appreciated them," Kingsley said in a low voice. "You know, I don't even typically get this angry – that's more Alastor than me – but I have limits, and one of those is when I see people like you try and evade the justice you deserve. Well, it's not going to happen this time – not on my watch. You'll get a hearing – a fair one, like any other accused criminal – and we'll see what happens. Really depends on what the tribunal says – you might end up in Azkaban after all."

The first real flicker of fear crossed through Harry's eyes, and Kingsley saw it. Seems that he's only scared at the possibility that others might indeed convict him for what he's done, he thought with scorn, liking the boy in front of him less and less. Well, despite the

fact that he might believe what he did was right, he's going to find out the rest of the world might not hold the same opinion.

The Auror let go of Harry's shirt and turned away. "I'll be around, Potter," he said icily, turning on his heel and heading towards the door. He ignored Sirius' shout and curse, his mind already on the next day, and the unpleasant conversation he was going to have with his department head.

* * *

"That smug, that arrogant..." Sirius growled.

"Sirius, enough, he's on our side," Lupin said sharply.

"Well, so's Snape, right?" Harry spat, turning towards the stairs. "Birds of a feather, those two –"

"Harry, it might not seem like it, but you'll have to face the public sometime, and despite it all, Kingsley is trying to help you," Lupin said, a desperate edge in his consoling tone that Harry noticed instantly. "He doesn't want to see you go to Azkaban, and he's trying to arrange your trial in the Auror military courts instead of the public Wizengamot – you've got a better chance before their tribunal than before that court, especially considering where their loyalties lie. But you have to think about the position he's in. He's sworn to uphold justice, and after what happened tonight –"

"I've already explained what I did, Lupin," Harry said, deflating somewhat as dull exhaustion crept into his tone. "Those fliers chose to go after me. They chose to follow me past the plane... it's not my fault..."

"You were running from the law, Harry, and you must have known they were no professional Quidditch players," Lupin said quietly. "That why you tried that stunt – you knew you could throw them off\ with it."

“A good flier or a good Auror could have survived that!” Harry snapped. “It’s not my fault they can’t handle themselves –”

“Harry, those weren’t Aurors,” Sirius interrupted, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. “Those were low-to-mid level officers from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, a big difference from Aurors. When they went to arrest you at the Burrow, they had Hit Wizards with them – their best fighters, but still not elite Aurors. It’s like comparing, oh, I don’t know, trained gladiators with knights.”

“But why didn’t they send Aurors?” Harry asked, real confusion replacing tiredness in his voice. “Isn’t this sort of thing their job?”

“MLE deals with crime like this,” Sirius replied, turning away quietly. “Aurors deal with fighting the Dark Arts, and you weren’t using those.” He gave a bitter laugh. “It’s almost funny, they brought in both to bring me in...”

“But why didn’t they send Hit Wizards from the start?”

“They didn’t think you were going to be a huge threat, I’m guessing,” Lupin replied tiredly. “I mean, an underage wizard, against two qualified members of MLE? They probably sent in two low-level people because they thought it was an easy job. And let’s be completely frank here, Harry – without that lucky stunt with the mirror, you would have never have gotten out of there.”

“But why didn’t they send Hit Wizards when I was flying?”

“Good question,” Sirius replied, frowning. “I’m guessing the reason’s likely bureaucratic – or they still didn’t think you were enough of a threat. Kemester’s brother, though, would have been a Hit Wizard – and once again, and not to take anything away from your flying skill, Harry, but you were incredibly lucky.”

Harry snorted with disgust. “Of course that’s it. Well right now I feel like the unluckiest bastard in the world, especially after what Dumbledore told me... and because if those damned Dementors hadn’t shown up, none of this would have happened!”

“It’ll be the key to your case,” a new voice said wearily. Harry looked up with surprise as Mr. Weasley came into view, rubbing the lenses of his glasses with a thin cloth. “You’ll need to prove that you were justified in attempting to escape, and that means proving your intent, and the only way to do that is to prove that there really were Dementors there. But that’ll be for another day. You need to get some sleep – you’ll have a rough couple of days until the hearing’s called.”

“Where’s my room?” Harry asked.

“First flight of stairs – Ron and Hermione are likely waiting for you. Try and get some sleep, though. I know you’ll want to talk, but...”

“Believe me,” Harry muttered darkly, pulling away from Sirius and Lupin and heading towards the stairs, “talking’s the last thing I want to do.”

The entire evening seemed a blur to him. The Dementors, the mirror exploding, the terrifyingly close flight to the plane, the ‘arrest’ at the Burrow, the memory Dumbledore had shown him... Well, I was the one who was asking for something to do, after being stuck at the Dursleys’ for a month, Harry thought bitterly. Guess I got my wish – definitely proves that I should be more careful for what I wish for...

He opened the door silently to hear Hermione’s shrill voice. “He’s got a case, I mean, there’s definitely provisions in the Statute of Secrecy, if that’s what they’re worried about –”

“Believe it or not,” Harry said slowly, closing the door behind him and leaning against it, “I honestly don’t think that the Ministry will be bothering much with the Statute charges when they can press manslaughter.”

Hermione turned quickly, her eyes going wide at the sight of Harry. He knew he didn’t present a particularly attractive silhouette, with his slumped shoulders and bloodstained shirt, so he wasn’t surprised to see her gasp and Ron’s face go pale, his freckles standing out more in the dim light.

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione said in a slightly muffled voice as she leapt off her bed and threw her arms around him. “Fred and George have already been up, they told us what happened –”

“Not gonna lie, mate, but you look terrible,” Ron said heavily, running his hand through his hair. “Though after what you’ve been through, I... well, I can’t say I’m entirely surprised.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Harry muttered darkly. “You were talking about my case?”

Hermione swallowed nervously. “Harry, it’s a big deal, and I mean really big. Have you thought about what you’re going to say to the Wizengamot?”

Harry snorted with disgust as he sat onto the bed. “I’ve had other things on my mind.”

“Other things besides a trial? Your trial?” Ron asked incredulously.

“A chat with Dumbledore tends to drive a lot of other things out of your head,” Harry growled.

“He was furious when he heard that Mundungus had left early so that the Dementors could attack,” Hermione said in a slightly awed voice. “It was scary, how angry he was.”

“Well, he has every right to be angry,” Harry spat, yanking his trunk out of his pocket and expanding it with a wave of his wand. “If he hadn’t had run out on me, I would never be facing murder charges. It is interesting, though,” he added, his eyes narrowing as he looked up at his friends, “that nobody bothered to tell me that I was being followed or watched, or that nobody has bothered to tell me anything. Your letters were useless, you can’t argue with that!”

Hermione swallowed hard. “Harry, you have to understand, Dumbledore made us swear not to tell you anything. Security reasons, in case the owls were intercepted.”

“Dumbledore certainly enjoys playing his little games with information,” Harry said savagely, his hands clenched into tight fists. “Probably the root of most of these damned problems...”

“Harry, you’re not making a lot of sense...”

Harry’s eyes snapped up, meeting Ron’s shocked gaze. “What Ron? I finally know something that you don’t, and you act all shocked? Dumbledore finally thought that I could handle it, considering that I’ve got blood on my hands –”

“Harry –”

“Those were the words he used, Ron,” Harry growled. “He’s probably been waiting for something like this, the old bastard –”

“You shouldn’t call him that,” Hermione said heatedly, “after all he’s done for you!”

Harry could hardly believe his ears. “After all he’s done for me?” he snarled, getting to his feet and glaring furiously at Hermione. “All right then, Hermione, let me ask you this: do you think telling a student that he is the only one who can kill Voldemort is a service? He showed me a memory in one of those Pensieve things of him receiving a prophecy from Trelawney, one that told him that I had to be the one to kill the greatest Dark wizard in England. And that’s not it, either,” Harry continued, a dangerous light in his eyes. “I saw Snape in the memory too.”

“Snape? What would he be –”

“He’s the one that made sure Voldemort found out the prophecy,” Harry spat, visible hatred on his face now. “The sallow-faced ass told Voldemort as much of the prophecy as he could overhear before the bartender threw him out on his greasy Death Eater ass! And he let that devil teach us at Hogwarts, and he still trusts him!”

Hermione's hands were over her mouth now, while Ron looked like he was going to be sick. Neither of them spoke.

"So where does that leave me?" Harry growled, breathing heavily as he sat back down on the bed. "I have to face trial, thanks to that bloody Auror Shacklebolt, and now I also know I've got to kill Voldemort. Merlin only knows how that's going to happen, with the Ministry at my throat."

"Harry, you must have known that you were going to be the one killing You-Know-Who in the end," Ron reasoned, still slightly pale at the sight of his friend's anger. "I mean, how many times have you faced him now –"

"That's not the point, Ron!" Harry said furiously, getting up again. "Dumbledore wouldn't have told me this if I hadn't been responsible for deaths tonight, and it's really kind of something I wish I would have known a long time ago – then I would have just thrown the Killing Curse at him while I had a chance and rid myself of this! And to top it all off, Dumbledore says it's 'too risky' for him to try and teach me any magic that might help me actually fight Voldemort!" Harry snorted with disgust. "Says it's because 'the Ministry might consider me a security threat' – what a load of shit, they already do!"

"And you're not the only one they consider a threat, Harry," Hermione said, finally getting her voice back. "It's Dumbledore too – they threw him off the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards, and the way things are going, he could be thrown into Azkaban – especially if he's defending you in court or trying to help you – the Ministry could label it as obstruction of justice."

"Hermione, they can't accuse Dumbledore just for defending Harry, he's entitled to legal aid in court!" Ron argued. "I mean, it'd be a setback, sure –"

"Why on earth was Dumbledore thrown out?" Harry asked through gritted teeth, his curiosity overruling his immediate frustrated fury.

“He gave a few speeches saying You-Know-Who’s back,” Ron said darkly, “and since Fudge doesn’t buy it, he prefers to think Dumbledore is lying and throw him out. Fudge is scared shitless of Dumbledore, and he’d rather delude himself into believing Dumbledore’s lying than really come to grips with the fact that You-Know-Who is actually back. Dad reckons that Fudge thinks Dumbledore’s going to try and take over the Ministry.”

“At least we’d have better leadership,” Harry spat, consigning Fudge to the deepest hell he could think of. “Dumbledore’s at least intelligent, even if he’s a controlling, manipulative arse.”

“Harry!”

“You can’t say it’s not true, Hermione! I don’t care if he’s our Headmaster or a powerful wizard, he’s been manipulating this to his advantage!”

“Harry, he’s... he wants You-Know-Who gone as much as anyone, and he really does have your best interests at heart. I’m sure that’s why he didn’t tell you about this prophecy until now –”

“Until I can handle it,” Harry snapped. “Yeah, he gave me that line too. I’m not entirely sure I buy it, but he’s not saying anything else. Makes me wonder what exactly he was waiting for, really, when this all fitted into his little master plan. Hell, I don’t even think he’s got a plan right now – this came out of the blue for him as much as anyone.”

“Nobody could have expected this,” Ron pointed out. “I mean... bloody hell, this surprised everyone, including the Ministry. They weren’t expecting for four people to die and two to end up in St. Mungo’s...”

Harry’s face darkened. “Yeah, well, I wasn’t exactly planning for it either. The most plausible thing was that I was supposed to be the one to kill Voldemort – hell, everyone expected that. Not that Dumbledore’s bothered to tell me how...”

“You-Know-Who can wait until after this court case –”

“No, Hermione, you don’t get it. Once Voldemort knows I’m coming after him – and he will figure it out – he’s going to start killing things that matter to me to draw me into the open – and that means either he or the Ministry can snatch me up. It’s either Azkaban or death, and I’m not a huge fan of either.” Harry opened a fist and stared into his palm. “Merlin, I don’t even know what I’m going to do...”

“But how is You-Know-Who going to figure that out?” Ron asked, confusion in his voice.

Harry gave a grim chuckle. “I bet he already knows.”

* * *

Dumbledore looked at a livid Snape with irritation. “Come now, Severus, you knew this day would come. You knew that he’d have to know the truth sooner or later –”

“He’s unstable, he’s reckless, and you just told him that I betrayed his parents,” Snape snarled, slamming his fist onto Dumbledore’s heavy desk. “Damn it, Dumbledore, are you trying to paint a target on me? I’m going to have to teach Potter for the next three years –”

“And Harry is also rational enough not to attack you in front of students,” Dumbledore replied sternly.

“You think that’s going to stop him?” Snape asked incredulously. “Have you lost your mind, Dumbledore? I knew his father, and I know Black! I know exactly what he could be capable of – damn it, Black was capable of murder at fifteen! Have you forgotten that so quickly?”

“You’re assuming that they will collaborate –”

“They’re both on the run from the law and they’re family who believe that ‘they did what they had to do,’” Snape spat. “Loose cannons who want me dead! Of course they will collaborate, Dumbledore, do you honestly think they won’t?”

“That’s enough, Severus,” Dumbledore said, steel in his voice. “I trust you, and I also trust both of them. I can understand that your paranoia considering your proximity to Voldemort –”

Snape gave a hard, mirthless laugh. “You think I’m paranoid, Dumbledore, for fearing the Dark Lord’s power, for fearing that I might be discovered as the double agent I am? Of course I’m afraid – any rational man would be, considering the way the Dark Lord operates. But this is different – I don’t fear Black or Potter, but I know very well how dangerous they could be, both to me and to your side of this war. And both of them have blood on their hands. Hell, hearing Black boast about killing Death Eaters in the first war sounded so similar to Potter’s ranting this evening!” Snape sneered with disgust, his lank hair falling across his face as he shook his head. “No, Dumbledore, I won’t be a party to that ‘justification.’”

“And yet it is so similar to your own,” Dumbledore replied coolly, his eyes blazing with fire.

“Don’t push that on me, Dumbledore,” Snape growled, his own glare matching Dumbledore’s. “You know whose orders I’m following. He turned away and yanked open the door to Dumbledore’s study. “Don’t expect me to come to any more meeting at Headquarters. I have enough hazards in my job already without Potter and Black being added to that list.”

And with that, he slammed the door, leaving Dumbledore alone with his frustrated thoughts.

Author's Notes: sorry about the delay, this chapter was tough to write. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

THE 'BOY-WHO-LIVED' KILLS!

It came as a terrifying shock to the Ministry of Magic and the wizarding world, yet one that was expected by many Ministry experts – and one that will likely appall the wizarding world. With brand new from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the Prophet is able to confirm this horrifying news: that the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, has been arrested and charged on multiple charges of manslaughter, resisting arrest, and violations of the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Wizardry and the Statute of Secrecy.

“Most of the details of the crime are confidential,” Dmitri Kemester told reporters late last night, “but I can tell you all this: Potter will be held accountable for his crimes in the Wizengamot, which resulted in my brother Bartholomew’s brutal murder in Potter’s daredevil flight from Magical Law Enforcement officials.”

Such a flight, as of yet unreported by Muggle authorities, reportedly took place last evening, when Potter chose to flee from his home in Surrey. When pursued, he engaged in a horrifying maneuver involving a Muggle flying device (an ‘aeroplane’) that nearly killed him – and which resulted in the deaths of his pursuers. Potter was finally detained by the Auror Department outside of Ottery St. Catchpole, and is expected to face trial within the week.

“After all, it’s not like the courts are particularly busy,” Kemester, a high-ranking Hit Wizard in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, noted bitterly, “although I expect this particular case to generate a fair bit of publicity.”

Kemester did not elaborate much about the initial reason for the Boy-Who-Lived’s dramatic flight from his home, yet he did state that Magical Law Enforcement officials had been called to his residence to address violations of the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Wizardry and the Statute of Secrecy. According to Kemester, the two

officials are currently in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies, undergoing extensive healing procedures.

The Hit Wizard also told Prophet correspondents not to 'interfere' in Wizengamot proceedings and that all 'appropriate' information would be released in due process. "The public outcry is expected to be immense, but the law cannot be ignored in the view of popular opinion," Kemester stated firmly.

This, however, may be impossible to actualize in reality, as Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge expressed in a public statement late last night upon being informed of the incident. The Minister stated in no uncertain terms that Potter's 'popularity' will be a factor considered by the Wizengamot High Judges, and that he will receive treatment equivalent to everyone else.

"Potter will be treated like any other criminal," the Minister stated firmly, "and ignoring the due process of law in favour of Dumbledore's will is a flagrant violation of justice."

Harry couldn't read anymore. With a disgusted snort he tossed the paper back onto the table, watching the flimsy pages flutter before settling against the wood.

"How can they print something like this?" he asked furiously. "The bias is thick enough to cut with a dragon's tooth! You'd think that at least the Ministry can show some impartiality in the damned case! Aren't you 'innocent until proven guilty' in the Wizengamot?"

"Harry, it's been like this all year, and not just for you," Sirius said in a low voice. "Dumbledore's received plenty of heat too, because of his repeated attempts to convince the public Voldemort is back. Having something like this come out... well, it would be a field day for those in the Prophet who want to slander you for making the same comments."

"They're true!" Harry snarled. "Voldemort is back!"

“But for Fudge’s propaganda campaign, your flight is a godsend,” Lupin explained, keeping his voice cautious against Harry’s building fury. “In one stroke, they can finish what Rita Skeeter started and discredit you completely by labeling you a criminal.”

“Just like what they did with me,” Sirius growled. “You think anyone will believe an ‘insane mass-murderer’? It’s a similar case...”

His voice trailed off, and Harry noticed the hesitancy in a second. Despite the correlation Sirius and Lupin were drawing, it wasn’t as similar as his godfather was trying to paint it.

“Don’t waste your time reading that rag, Harry,” Hermione said, nervous at the sight of Harry’s fury, picking up the paper and carefully folding it. “If anything, you should spend your time on your defense before the Wizengamot.”

“Presuming Fudge doesn’t pull a Crouch and have me thrown in Azkaban without a trial, just like Sirius,” Harry spat darkly.

“No legal precedent anymore, Harry,” Lupin said with a weak grin. “Besides, despite how much Fudge would want to do that, the only way it could potentially work politically would be if he admitted Voldemort was back and you were acting on his orders. Then he could potentially have precedent, but if he did that, everyone would know you were telling the truth all along, and Fudge would be the one discredited, not you.”

“Think of it this way, Harry,” Mr. Weasley finally spoke up, carefully placing down his own copy of the Prophet and eyeing the angry young man through his thin glasses. “Kingsley is trying to secure for you an Auror tribunal, not the full Wizengamot court. You’d have a better chance of getting your case across in one of those tribunals, and they’d also be more willing to listen to you. Trying you in the Wizengamot full court... you wouldn’t be able to get your case out before the judges tore you apart. Fudge officiates on that court, too, and he would easily be able to influence them against you, whereas the Aurors tend to think more before they pass judgments.”

“Doesn’t hurt that most of the Aurors are on our side,” Ron added as he took another large bite of his toast.

“Not all of them, though,” Lupin said cautiously. “And Rufus Scrimgeour – he’s the head of the Auror Department – knows that there’s something going on.”

“Of course, it doesn’t really help that Shacklebolt doesn’t even believe I’m innocent,” Harry snarled with disgust.

Lupin exchanged a quick glance with Sirius. “You have to realize, Harry, in legal terms, you aren’t innocent,” Lupin began softly.

“What else was I supposed to do, Lupin?” Harry said in a deadly soft voice. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Harry, I don’t blame you for what you did for a second,” Sirius said in a low voice, “but the key now is getting you out of this. And you have a solid case, when you think about it, better than mine ever was. Your entire flight was instigated by one event – you casting the Patronus Charm to get rid of the Dementors. Clause Seven of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery states that you were allowed to cast said spell to save the lives of you and your cousin. If you can prove that your escape from Privet Drive was justified by your own fear that the Ministry would snap your wand before due process... well, the rest of your case falls into place.”

“You can only win this case by attacking the premise,” Hermione said softly, pulling out a paper and quill to start scribbling down notes. “If you prove that the Ministry shouldn’t have been there in the first place and that they acted without precedent, you can make the case that you were acting as a combatant against unlawful forces. And given that you didn’t take any action against civilians –”

Harry snorted in disbelief. “Hermione, I can barely follow or accept that argument, do you honestly think the Ministry will?”

Hermione looked indignant. "I'm trying to help here! It's the only way you've got a chance to win this case with the tribunal!"

"Assuming Shacklebolt even gets it," Harry said icily. "So what am I looking at for sentences, if I get convicted?"

"Harry, there's no need to be morbid –"

"This isn't being morbid, this is facing reality," Harry said testily. "What am I facing?"

"Heavy fines, likely Azkaban," Lupin said heavily after a long pause. "Maximum sentence would be several years."

"And what if I cut a deal with that head Auror, Scrimgeour?"

Mr. Weasley, Hermione, and Ron all tensed. "Harry, what exactly are you planning?" Ron asked carefully after a few seconds.

"It's an idea I had late last night, but I got the impression last evening that there was some... animosity between Magical Law Enforcement and the Auror Office," Harry began, getting to his feet and beginning to pace. "They weren't too happy when Kingsley brought me in."

"Well, even though they are technically the same thing, there is some... friction between the two groups," Mr. Weasley said carefully. "Rivalry, mainly, between the Aurors and the Hit Wizards."

"It's widely known that the Auror Office has more political clout, and that the Hit Wizards don't like it," Sirius said grimly. "On the other hand, Aurors don't typically like Hit Wizards that much, because they tend to get in the way during large-scale, high-profile investigations. Well, at least they did during the First War."

"And the Hit Wizards would want me charged in the Wizengamot, right?"

“ Obviously. More publicity for them,” Lupin said bitterly. “Big publicity for their office if you got convicted. And given that Bartholomew Kemester was killed, I bet many of them consider it a personal vendetta.”

“ And where would the Aurors want me charged?” Harry asked coolly, cracking his knuckles as he paced.

“Well... those on our side would want you charged in the Auror tribunal, obviously,” Mr. Weasley said cautiously. “They don’t want to see you locked up. The others would be indifferent. Probably leaning towards the tribunal, simply because they know what the media circus in the Wizengamot would be like. Fact is, the media would likely hamstring your case even before it got brought before the open courts. An Auror tribunal would be mostly secret.”

“I don’t even think the media is even allowed into an Auror tribunal case,” Sirius mused, a small grin spreading across his face. “You have a plan, don’t you, Harry?”

Harry stopped and looked down the table. “Here’s what I’m thinking. I meet with Scrimgeour and convince him that it’s in his best interest to put this case to the Auror tribunal.”

“ Harry!” Hermione exclaimed, scandalized. “You can’t bribe the Head of the Auror Office!”

“Even if he has a taste for politics,” Ron muttered. Mr. Weasley gave his youngest son an angry look, but Harry had heard the comment just the same.

“Did I say bribe?” Harry snarled, his anger coming back again. “No. I said convince. Big difference, Hermione. As I was saying, I convince him to hold the trial before the Auror tribunal, then I put forward my case.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Hell, I can even run with what Hermione’s proposing. Odds are, I’ll likely still have to plead guilty.”

Ron’s face drained of colour. “Harry, you aren’t planning to –”

“I’m not going to Azkaban, if that’s what you mean,” Harry cut him off harshly. “I’ll pay a fine or something – most people don’t know that I’ve got gold in any significant amount. Odds are, if Scrimgeour’s running the trial, he’ll likely tamp down the sentence.”

“And what makes you think that you can get him to do that?” Lupin asked suspiciously. “Harry, do you know something that we don’t?”

Harry turned to Sirius. “Can we talk, privately?” he asked in a low voice.

Sirius understood in a second and got up. “We’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said quietly as the two headed to the drawing room.

The second Sirius closed the door, he turned back to Harry, who was pacing again, a frustrated expression on his face. “So what exactly is this all about, Harry?” he asked.

“Politics.”

“You’ll need more than that, Harry, if you want to win this case.”

“Is what Ron said accurate?” Harry asked suddenly. “Does that head Auror Scrimgeour have a ‘taste for politics’?”

“It’s fairly well-known, actually,” Sirius replied with a heavy sigh. “Rumor has it he wants to be Minister some day. Reminds me of Crouch, really.”

“Then he’ll be predictable,” Harry muttered.

Sirius crossed his arms over his chest. “Harry, you need to tell me what’s going on.”

“The information that Voldemort’s back is going to come out sooner or later,” Harry said grimly, “and when it does, Fudge is going to get the sound thrashing he deserves. When that happens, who do you think will be the ideal contender for Minister? Scrimgeour’s going to

have a fair shot, as former head of the Auror Department. Now let me ask you this: wouldn't his campaign be bolstered if he was seen to be working with 'the-Boy-Who-Lived'?"

"You're talking about using your fame as a political weapon," Sirius said thoughtfully. "And it would be a good weapon, too. Especially when it comes out that you were right about Voldemort being back all along."

"It's not a weapon I want to use, you're exactly right," Harry finished, raising a finger. "I promise Scrimgeour my support, tell him with good evidence that Voldemort is back, and then he starts preparing for his political campaign before Fudge knows what hit him."

Sirius whistled. "It would be a tempting offer, but Scrimgeour's got a reputation for being a suspicious and crafty bastard. He'll want more than that."

"I know, and that's why I'll need your help."

Sirius cocked an eyebrow. "Harry, I still have a price on my head. I can't exactly go about convincing Scrimgeour —"

"You don't even need to leave this godforsaken house to help me now, Sirius," Harry interrupted. "I need information you likely have."

"About what?" Sirius asked, mystified. He suddenly tensed. "You know I can't tell you anything about what the Order's doing —"

Harry snorted with disgust. "Dumbledore's orders, I know. But that's not what I need."

"What do you need, then?"

"I need to know if the Order of the Phoenix has anybody in Gringotts," Harry said in a low voice.

Sirius looked startled. "Why would that even matter?"

“I need something on Scrimgeour and as many tribunal members as possible that aren’t on our side,” Harry growled, pacing even faster. “Odds are that if Scrimgeour has a taste for politics, like what Ron said, he’s got something to hide – probably in Gringotts.”

“Harry, you’re thinking of blackmailing the Head of the Auror Office!” Sirius said, aghast.

“I don’t have enough evidence yet for solid blackmail, though,” Harry said, as if he hadn’t even heard what Sirius had said. “What I need is the implication – a bluff of sorts that makes Scrimgeour overestimate me – and subsequently consider me as a stronger ally for his campaign. He’ll have more respect for a man he fears.”

“Harry, if Dumbledore catches wind that you’re planning –”

“Dumbledore’s got no say in what I’m planning,” Harry snarled. “Let me frank here, Sirius, just so you know the predicament I’m in. Dumbledore told me last night that there was some twisted prophecy that predicted I had to be the one to kill Voldemort before he kills me. In my opinion, the sooner this happens, the better – at least before Voldemort decides to start killing people just to get to me, because he knows part of the prophecy.”

Sirius’ face was white. “Damn it, Harry, so that’s the reason why Voldemort went after Lily and James! Dumbledore told you this?”

“Last night,” Harry said with disgust. “He also said that he was planning on not telling me until later, but since I ‘now have blood on my hands’, he thought I was ready.”

Real anger was showing on Sirius’ face now. “How can he make that judgment? How dare he? You should have known years ago!”

“I understand his logic – he wanted to keep me happy,” Harry replied, his voice softening for a second before returning to hard fury. “But then again, he also said it was too dangerous to start training me this year to fight Voldemort.”

“What?” Sirius exclaimed, shock and anger warring for dominance in his voice. “You can’t be serious! What if he comes after you? You’ll need to be able to defend yourself!”

Harry’s hand clenched into a fist. “Believe me, I know that, so I’m planning on taking matters into my own hands. Dumbledore can try and defend me all he wants, but right now his ‘protection’ is becoming more of a hindrance than a shield. I need to be ready to face Voldemort, not cowering behind Dumbledore, and I can’t get ready if I’m sitting in a cell in Azkaban.”

“Dumbledore’s going to try and defend you in court, you know that, Harry,” Sirius replied, his anger abating slightly. “Though with the way things are right now –”

“He could do more damage than help in this case,” Harry said coldly. “If nobody believes him, or they think he’s trying to destabilize the government, they won’t listen to a word he – or I – says. That’s why I’m trying to handle this on my own – I’ll need practice anyways if I’m going to be taking on Voldemort.”

“Harry... Merlin, you know we want to help, right?” Sirius finally said after a long silence. “So does Dumbledore, and Hermione, and though you might not believe it, even Kingsley’s trying to help too.”

“Sirius, I’m not asking for their help, I’m asking for yours,” Harry said steadily, his eyes blazing with contained anger.

“I’ll do whatever I can,” Sirius said instantly. “I understand what you need, and frankly,” he added with a ghost of a smile, “I’m more than a little impressed. You’re growing up and getting some guts along with it.”

“So is there anyone in the Order in Gringotts?” Harry persisted.

“Bill Weasley, but he’s not the man you want,” Sirius said after a second of thought. “He’s too loyal to Dumbledore, and he’d report anything you might try and do. You want someone in the Department of Magical Finance at the Ministry.”

“No, I don’t,” Harry said flatly. “Scrimgeour could reach them there, and the last thing I need is for him to rat out my material. At least if I get information from Gringotts, the goblins will stall any investigation Scrimgeour might make.”

“That’s true,” Sirius admitted, starting to pace a bit himself. “I do know an accountant who works out of Gringotts. Rich wizard named Welmon, Vesperian Welmon. He was the one who got my vaults and investments arranged after I ran away.”

“You ran away?” Harry asked, shocked. “From here?”

“When I was sixteen,” Sirius said bitterly. “I’d had enough of all of it. My parents and their pureblood tripe, my idiotic brother who bought all of it, my damned relatives, most of whom became Death Eaters or married them –”

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“Yeah, Regulus,” Sirius said, his voice getting even more bitter as he turned towards a large tapestry hanging on the wall. “He died years ago... considering he joined the Death Eaters, you can’t be surprised...”

Harry could hear the trace of wistfulness in Sirius’ voice, and he swallowed hard, despite himself. “Sirius, can you contact Welmon for me?”

“I’m on the run, Harry, I can’t do much,” Sirius replied with a slightly bemused expression. “You’d be better off talking to Welmon yourself.”

“Well, right now I’m supposed to be in Ministry custody,” Harry said with a humorless grin, “so I’m no better off.”

“Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“You could be pretending to go to Gringotts to speak with a lawyer in finance about managing your accounts,” Sirius said slowly. “Then, while you’re at Gringotts, you couldn’t be touched – goblins wouldn’t want their clients endangered under privacy protocol. If you were to sneak into Gringotts under your Invisibility Cloak with a member of the Order, you could be able to set up your meeting with Welmon while the Order member sets up for your escape...”

“You think you could convince someone from the Order to go along with that?” Harry asked incredulously. “In Dumbledore’s eyes, that could be considered betrayal.”

“ Sure,” Sirius replied. “She’s a friend of mine in the Auror Department, Nymphadora Tonks, only just joined the Order on Moody’s advice. Her mother Andromeda was my favourite cousin, and she and I got along famously.”

“And what makes you think this Nymphadora –”

“Only call her Tonks, Harry,” Sirius warned. “She hates her first name.”

“Whatever... what makes you think she can be trusted?” Harry asked sharply.

Sirius was silent for a few seconds. “Well,” he finally began, “she’s Moody’s protégé, and Moody’s on your side, even if he won’t say it.”

“What?”

“He’s had to do plenty of things that were on the edges of the law as an Auror that he didn’t want to do, Harry,” Sirius said quietly, “and he understands that you didn’t intend to get those officials killed last night. And he wants Voldemort finished as much as any of us. You could trust him, and Tonks takes after him too.”

“It’s a good plan,” Harry admitted, his anger still simmering below the surface. “All right, can you talk to this Auror and get this plan working?”

“In a heartbeat.”

Harry blew out a long breath of air. “Well, that at least covers that angle. If I frame the bluff well enough, Scrimgeour will be between a rock and a hard place of his own creation, and I’ll be free and clear.” He sighed with frustration. “Ron and Hermione won’t like this – they can’t know what I’m planning.”

“They’re your friends, Harry,” Sirius said, slightly surprised and concerned at Harry’s vehemence.

“I don’t care, they’re too loyal to Dumbledore – Hermione directly, and Ron through Mr. Weasley. I want to trust them... but I can’t make any mistakes here, especially if Voldemort chooses to interfere.”

Sirius put his hand on Harry’s shoulder and looked deep into his eyes. “I won’t betray you, Harry. I swore to James I wouldn’t.”

“Good, because I need your help with one more thing,” Harry said in a low voice. “I need all the information possible about the First War with Voldemort and the Death Eaters.”

“What kinds of information?”

“Everything. I want spells used, major and minor fights, any sort of court cases, anything the Ministry did to try and fight, what the old Order of the Phoenix did, and everything that even relates to Voldemort.” Harry gave Sirius a steely expression. “There could be patterns if Voldemort tries something again.”

“He doesn’t have the same manpower as before, thankfully,” Sirius said, keeping his own voice quiet. “Most of his better Death Eaters are in Azkaban.”

“Not for long,” Harry said grimly. “The Dementors will go to Voldemort the second he asks them – Dumbledore got that one right – and he’ll be back to his old strength in no time. The fiend’s got a reputation for making insidious plans, and if we even want to have a hope of stopping him, we need to catch him quickly.”

“Dumbledore’s already trying to do this –”

“Well, it’s not like he’s sharing the information,” Harry said icily. “I don’t want to have to do this, but if he’s going to keep things from me, I need my own source of information.”

“You know I can’t tell you much about what the Order’s doing now, Harry,” Sirius whispered.

“I’m not asking for that,” Harry whispered back fiercely. “I doubt anyone’s even asked for this information. But you lived through the First War, Sirius, and so did a lot of the other Order members, I’m guessing. I didn’t. I need to know this if I’m going to be ready to take Voldemort down.”

Green eyes met grey eyes, and they both understood.

“I’ll do what I can, Harry,” Sirius said in a low voice.

“Good, because this conversation never happened,” Harry replied quickly, moving towards the door. “I may be fifteen, but Voldemort’s not waiting, and neither am I.”

“You know, Harry, that this is going to be ugly,” Sirius said as Harry’s hand closed on the doorknob.

Harry swallowed hard, as he imagined the looks of disappointment and betrayal on the faces of Ron, Hermione, and Dumbledore when they finally discovered the truth behind Harry’s newest plan.

“Believe me, Sirius, I know. By Merlin, I know.”

Author's Notes: wow! Thanks for the reviews... I had no idea this fic was getting to be this popular. In any case, this chapter may be short, but it is setting the stage for the upcoming action. So I guess until next time, read, review, and enjoy!

“You have a court date.”

“When?” Harry asked, looking up from the newspapers strewn across his bed. Most were copies of last month’s Daily Prophets, which Mr. Weasley and Sirius had been saving for the crosswords and for the occasional news article surrounding Dumbledore. Harry had asked for them a day after his conversation with Sirius.

“Fourteenth of August,” Sirius replied with a heavy shrug. “Kingsley just sent us the information from the Auror Office.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “So does that mean I’m being charged in Auror court, or the full Wizengamot?”

“Kingsley spoke to Scrimgeour about that yesterday, and he hasn't decided yet,” Sirius said bitterly, sitting down next to a pile of discarded newspapers. “Turns out Scrimgeour got an earful from Amelia Bones for interfering in Magical Law Enforcement affairs, and he wasn’t too thrilled about that. Dmitri Kemester’s been making quite a stir in the Ministry right now about how the Auror office is ‘interfering in Hit Wizard affairs’.”

Harry snorted. “I bet they’ve heard that before.”

“Unfortunately, people are actually listening now, considering that you’re such a high-profile criminal,” Sirius remarked wryly. Harry gave him an exasperated look, but his godfather’s sardonic tone never dimmed. “Scrimgeour’s also not too happy that you’re not sitting in an Auror security cell, but instead at ‘Kingsley’s private lockdown,’ as he called it.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Just wonderful. I’m surprised Kingsley managed to stretch the truth that far.”

“So am I,” Sirius replied heavily. “He’s not happy that he’s had to lie to Scrimgeour on Dumbledore’s orders already.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Really? Dumbledore told Shacklebolt to lie to the Head of his department?”

“Yep,” Sirius said with a weak grin. “Nothing too serious yet – and nothing I can really tell you about either – but Scrimgeour’s been asking some funny questions, one’s that Kingsley really can’t answer well. And Scrimgeour’s not stupid by any stretch of the mind – he knows that something is going on.”

“And he doesn’t believe Dumbledore?” Harry said heavily.

Sirius shrugged. “Like I said, he’s likes playing political games, and right now the public mood is against the view that Voldemort is back. Scrimgeour might believe personally that Voldemort’s back, but he’s not going to say anything to anyone, and he’s certainly not going to take our side.”

Harry sighed with mingled frustration and disgust. “Well, I didn’t expect anything better, did I?”

“The plan’s still on, then?” Sirius asked, closing the door with a shove from the side of his foot.

“Well, it won’t be if I don’t find anything in these damned Prophets!” Harry snarled, crumpling up another newspaper and throwing it aside. “No clues, no implications, not a hint of anything that might implicate Scrimgeour! You’d think that the Prophet would jump all over that kind of thing!”

Sirius clenched a fist. “Harry, we both expected this. You knew you wouldn’t have much of a chance finding mainstream information about Scrimgeour’s dealings. And besides, he likes to keep away from the press as much as possible – or at least as far as he can control. And this is all assuming that’s Scrimgeour’s got any secret dealings at all.”

Harry frowned. "It's a possibility, right?"

"Nothing more than that," Sirius replied, his brow furrowing as he thought. "There was a lot of... well, creative financing coming out of the First War, and I would bet Scrimgeour at least put his hands in it. That would be the kind of evidence you would need – and it would hamstring his political career if it got out."

"It's also the evidence that would prove impossible to find. This entire bluff is going to be worthless if I don't have something to back it up," Harry muttered darkly, pulling over another paper from the stack. "And I'm running out of time, if I want to get into Gringotts tomorrow."

Sirius whistled softly. "So you're going with the accelerated schedule that I suggested?"

"It makes sense. The more time Scrimgeour has for the message to sink in, the more effective the blackmail will be," Harry replied, looking up again at Sirius.

"He won't like being threatened, and as you pointed out, telling him earlier gives him more time to cover his tracks."

Harry gave a bitter chuckle. "Why would he even bother? Nobody cares enough about what happened fourteen, fifteen years ago to look – unless they've got everything to lose."

Like me. He left the words unspoken, but Sirius didn't need to read minds to know what Harry was thinking.

"We should talk about Gringotts again," Harry said, changing the topic as he pulled a scrap of paper up from the floor. "You talked to that Tonks girl last night after the meeting, right?"

Sirius nodded. "She heard your story. Was relatively impressed, too, though you're not going to get her to say that – at least not publicly."

"Not with Dumbledore, Snape, and Shackbolt in the room, you're not," Harry spat. "So is she going to help?"

“She’s got time off, so the answer’s likely a ‘yes’,” Sirius replied, relaxing on one of the few clear spots of Harry’s bed. “And she’s not thrilled that there are a lot of unknowns in this plan.”

“I’m not thrilled with the number of unknowns in this plan, believe me,” Harry grumbled with frustration. “But it’s not like either of us have great information on the inner workings of Gringotts. Do you know if the goblins can detect Invisibility Cloaks at the doors, or just in the vaults?”

Sirius shrugged helplessly. “Harry, I don’t know as much as anyone. James never even tried breaking in under the Cloak.”

“This isn’t breaking in,” Harry said sharply. “This is entering without being seen. There is a difference.”

“Not to the Aurors or Magical Law Enforcement,” Sirius said grimly. “I thought about that last night: what if there is a member of either group in Gringotts? They won’t hesitate to arrest you on sight!”

“Can they do that?” Harry said thoughtfully.

“It would get you in their custody, and they’d likely let the Goblin Liaison Office work out the issues later,” Sirius said with disgust as pushed his long hair away from his face. “But that’s not the only issue, you know.”

Harry put a hand to his forehead. “I know, Sirius, I thought of it too. Even if I did find Welton in the bank, there’s no way I could make him talk without Veritaserum or the Imperius Curse. Isn’t it against some number of laws for financial institutions to betray their customers?”

Sirius let out a long breath. “Harry, I can’t honestly say I know. I don’t know a lot about wizarding finance. You’d be better off talking to Arthur or Kingsley about that.”

“Well, those are two people I can’t exactly go to, Sirius,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “And there’s still one other person working at Gringotts that could be an ally.”

“Fleur Delacour, right,” Sirius said tiredly. “Look, Harry, I know you might trust her, but there’s no telling right now how much access to information she might have. She might be an ally if you could convince her to help you, but we don’t even know her position at Gringotts, let alone who she’s permitted to talk to or which documents she might have. And the type of thing that you’re looking for –”

“Would require more specialization to be able to identify successfully, yes, Sirius, I get it!” Harry finally snapped. “But what other choice do I have?”

“Harry, you can trust me,” Sirius said in a steely voice, “and I’m trying to help you. Look, why don’t you come down and get some lunch, all right? Get away from the papers and talk to your friends. You haven’t said a word to Ron or Hermione since yesterday morning! They’re your friends, Harry.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to say, Sirius?” Harry replied, frustration clear in his voice. “That I’ve been plotting to break into Gringotts and steal blackmail on the Head of the Auror Department and his executives? Not exactly a conversation starter.”

Sirius put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I don’t have all the answers, Harry,” he said slowly, “but neither do you. You need your friends.”

“I need to be able to trust them first,” Harry said, turning so that his eyes met Sirius’. “And I know very well that they won’t approve of what I’m doing –”

“But I’m sure if you told them, they’d understand,” Sirius said calmly. “Look, I didn’t like half of the things James or Remus ever did, and I know they felt the same about some of the things I did too.”

“I have to wonder what it was that you did,” Harry muttered. Sirius gave a bitter laugh.

“Most of it was stupid, but there were times... well, during wars, you have to make hard choices. And as much as Fudge wants to deny it, this is a war. Voldemort's not lying down and dying just because we're here.” Sirius' hand tightened on Harry's shoulders.

“You're right,” Harry said quietly. “This is a war, and the only way we can win is if I'm ready.”

“And part of that is making sure you remember what you're fighting for,” Sirius replied, just as quietly. “Let's go down for lunch. Tonks dropped by, and she wants to meet you in person before tomorrow anyways.”

Harry looked at the papers for a long few seconds before finally sighing and getting to his feet. “It's not like I'm going to make much more progress here anyways,” he muttered.

“You'll be surprised at the things you notice with a full stomach.”

* * *

Sirius was just drawing out his wand to wash the dishes when he heard a friendly voice speak up from behind him.

“Mind if I give you a hand?”

Sirius smiled as he turned towards Nymphadora Tonks, a surprisingly wry smile on her heart-shaped face, her pink hair completely disheveled. “I dunno, Tonks, you might damage some of the crockery. And judging by your hair, you had a hard enough struggle getting through lunch.”

“Oh, shove it,” she replied good-naturedly, drawing her own wand and jabbing at the dishes. “Given the way you cook, you can't be surprised.”

“It's not my fault Molly's not here. She said she needed to pick up some decent food.”

“It’s a shame, because she’s a damn sight better at cooking than you are.”

“So what did you think of Harry?” Sirius asked in a low voice, changing the subject quickly. He doubted they would be overheard: Mundungus Fletcher was telling stories, and even Harry was chuckling, albeit somewhat distractedly.

Tonks cocked an eyebrow. “Seems completely ordinary, although,” she lowered her own voice, “if what you told me is true, he’s holding a lot of anger beneath the surface.”

“Nearly exploded on me upstairs,” Sirius murmured, his eyes flickering over to Harry again. “He doesn’t know who to trust.”

Tonks snorted. “That makes two of us.” Grabbing Sirius by the sleeve, she pulled them both into the darkened, cramped pantry.

“In the closet already, Tonks?”

“Stow it, Sirius, and besides, I’m your cousin, and that’s entirely twisted. I want to talk to you about this plan of yours.”

“Most of it’s Harry’s, not mine,” Sirius said with a shrug. “He thinks fast when he’s in trouble.”

“Trouble is understating what’s going on at the Ministry,” Tonks said with a shake of her head, her cheerful expression fading somewhat. “There’s been rivalry between the Aurors and the Hit Wizards before, but this case? Merlin’s pants, you’d think somebody painted a golden arrow on Harry with the inscription ‘Galleons here!’”

“That was to be expected as soon as Kingsley took him in, though,” Sirius replied, frowning slightly. “Has Scrimgeour been talking to you?”

“His inquiries have been higher up,” Tonks whispered. “Mostly about Kingsley, really.”

“Because he’s the one ‘holding’ Harry?” Sirius asked sardonically.

“More like because Scrimgeour thinks that Kingsley’s making a power grab.”

Sirius froze before letting out a whistle. “That’s not good.”

“ ‘Course, Kingsley’s got more integrity than to try and double-cross his own department Head, but Scrimgeour doesn’t know that.” She gave a bitter laugh. “At least Harry’s logic’s right on: Scrimgeour’s a politician, through and through. You should hear Mad-Eye talk about him.”

“Old enemies?”

“More like rivals,” Tonks replied thoughtfully. “Alastor was a bit older, more experienced, while Scrimgeour was the newcomer who was smart enough to snatch the department after Crouch and his cronies went out. Mad-Eye was the one who was always up for it, too, but he never wanted it either. Probably better in retrospect that he didn’t get it.”

“True enough,” Sirius agreed with a shiver. “Mad-Eye and politics wouldn’t get along well at all.” A sudden thought struck him. “This could be easier than we thought: does Moody have any information on Scrimgeour?”

Tonks snorted. “Nothing solid, or else Scrimgeour would have been thrown out years ago.”

“Mad-Eye hates him that much?”

“It goes back to the Rosier case,” Tonks said, leaning against a large stack of Butterbeer cases that Arthur Weasley had hauled in a week earlier. “Were you on the team that took Evan Rosier down?”

Sirius shivered again, this time with disgust. “No, the team that got him had Mad-Eye and Frank Longbottom on it. I was in the reserve

group, and we got there only after the Death Eaters were all gone or dead.” He remembered Rosier from school days – the young man had a horrible reputation with girls, and was known to be plotting to be a Death Eater. Unsurprisingly, he had joined up right out of Hogwarts, and had become one of Voldemort’s most reviled Death Eaters. If only I had been on the team to get him... then our little score could have been settled, he thought to himself. But I proved you wrong – I got the last laugh after all, because at least I’m still alive.

“Well, Mad-Eye got the kill – blew off half his face to get it – and that earned him a lot of Galleons,” Tonks said. “Long story short, a bunch of snooty pureblood accountants told him that under the legal terms, Alastor wasn’t entitled to the bounty because of some twisted legal loophole in Rosier’s will.”

Sirius shook his head. “Mad-Eye wouldn’t have been happy with that.”

“He got over it,” Tonks said with a shrug, “but what he didn’t get over as quickly was when he found out that most of that money still ended up in Auror vaults – just not his.”

Sirius’ eyes narrowed. “Scrimgeour?”

“He was involved in the Rosier case, or at least Alastor said he was,” Tonks said apologetically. “He was angrier with the accountants – said they didn’t have any duty to mess around in Auror business – but he always suspected Scrimgeour might have had something to do with the money...”

Suddenly, Sirius froze, a crashing wave of realization and elation surging through him. If it could be true, we could have a lead on what we need...

Peeking out of the pantry, he quickly caught Harry’s eye as he was putting his dishes on the wet counter. With a quick gesture, he motioned Harry over.

“What’s the problem?” Harry asked quickly as he saw Tonks in the cramped pantry – even more cramped with a third person inside of it. “Is the mission still on?”

“Tonks,” Sirius asked, his voice holding a strangely contemplative tone in it, “you said that Mad-Eye told you that he suspected Scrimgeour was involved in the Rosier case, right?”

“Correct,” Tonks said suspiciously. “Sirius, where are you going with _”

But Sirius raised a hand, silencing her instantly. “And that there had been accountants involved from where, exactly? Department of Magical Finance?”

Tonks frowned, a strange expression on her normally cheerful face. “I doubt it, personally. Alastor didn’t trust that department – still doesn’t, as a matter of fact.”

“So the transfer would have gone through Gringotts?”

Tonks nodded.

Sirius finally grinned. “I think we might have a lead on our blackmail, Harry.”

“Still doesn’t solve the problem of where the documentation would be,” Harry said testily.

“But we have a starting point, now,” Sirius said, talking faster and faster. “My uncle Cygnus Black married Druella Rosier, and I know Vesparian Welmon handled Uncle Cygnus’ finances too. Thus it only makes sense that one of Welmon’s affiliates at Gringotts did the rest of the accounting for Rosier’s family!”

“That’s reaching, Sirius,” Tonks said, but her hand was on her lip as she considered the option.

“But if Harry were to get his hands on any of the financial reports Welmon did for Cygnus and Druella, he could potentially track the accountant that worked with the rest of the Rosier family, particularly if he found the papers documenting the dowry Druella paid when she married him.”

“Those papers are likely half a century old, if not older,” Tonks said, both her eyebrows going up now. “They won’t be in Welmon’s regular storage...”

Sirius shook his head. “Welmon’s not like the other accountants at Gringotts – he’s an obsessive record-keeper, and he doesn’t trust the goblins farther than he can see them. If I remember correctly, he has massive mahogany cabinets in his main office which detail all the finances he’s ever processed.” His eyes glittered. “If Harry got into one of those cabinets, he could find the paper work and trace it into the deep storage rooms.”

“Won’t those be guarded?” Harry asked skeptically.

Sirius snorted. “Are you kidding? These aren’t the main vaults - just centuries of financial documents, piled in massive crates, all meticulously organized and chronicled. Harry, nobody cares enough to go there – who would even want to? It’s a clerk’s nightmare, and I doubt even the goblins would care much to go poking their long noses through that whole mess.”

Harry was about to speak, but he paused in mid-word and looked around carefully before lowering his voice.

“This is all great, but how am I going to get out?”

Tonks smiled widely. “Preferably the same way you came in.”

“They’re bound to know that something’s amiss by then,” Sirius reasoned, frowning. “I hadn’t even considered an exit strategy...”

But a grin was widening on Harry’s face.

“What?”

“I know how I can escape,” Harry whispered.

“How?”

Harry’s grin turned into a twisted smile. “The twins.”

* * *

“And you are certain of these developments, Lucius?”

“Absolutely, my Lord. I have spoken with those in the highest echelons of the Ministry, and it is indeed true.”

“So Harry Potter has shed blood,” Voldemort mused, more to himself than to his gathered Death Eaters in the darkened hall under Nott Hall. The Death Eater could hardly refuse his lord’s request for a short visit, and the secrecy enchantments over the manor were some of the best in England.

“Furthermore,” he continued, his voice growing slightly louder, “he is not being held at the Ministry for his crimes.”

Lucius inclined his head. “True, my Lord.”

Voldemort turned abruptly to a hooded figure near the shadowy edges of the room. “So, Snape? Which Auror holds the great Harry Potter in custody?”

“The Order of the Phoenix has recruited many in the Ministry,” Snape said in a low voice, not meeting the Dark Lord’s eyes. “He is in the custody of many.”

“And is likely heavily guarded,” Voldemort hissed. “No, it is not yet time for us to show our hands by attacking Potter en route. We must concentrate on other goals while Dumbledore is distracted. Did he take Potter’s newest escapade well, Snape?”

“He was... disappointed in Potter’s actions,” Snape replied slowly, “but I was not privy to all of their conversation either. I am not yet aware of how Dumbledore’s plans have changed.”

“Become aware,” Voldemort growled, “or I will find myself another spy. You are dismissed.”

Snape gave a short bow respectfully before Disapparating with a tiny pop.

The Dark Lord turned back to his remaining Death Eaters. There were only a few, but he knew they were loyal – he had culled the dissent from his ranks early.

“Yaxley, how goes the operations around Azkaban?”

“Conversing with the Dementors is difficult, my Lord,” the brutal-faced man replied, his voice gravelly and echoing in the darkened room, “but I am confident we’ll be able to drive them to our cause. Azkaban will soon be yours, but it may require personal attention to seal the deal.”

Voldemort nodded. He had expected this. “Tell the Dementors the negotiations will continue, but there will be a short delay. This unexpected opportunity with Potter’s trial will be a distraction for the Ministry, and a time in which we can act nearly uninhibited.”

The room was silent, despite the sudden shift in plans. Many of the Death Eaters shifted with surprise – one of the few things that their Lord had spoken of was his desire to claim Azkaban and free his loyal Death Eaters. What had changed?

Voldemort put a single finger to his chin as turned back towards Lucius Malfoy. “Ah, Malfoy, I have decided that you will play a central role in my newest plan. An opportunity to redeem yourself for your failures.”

“I will serve,” Lucius said swiftly, but the hesitation in his voice was audible.

“First, you will contact our mutual friend Snape and ask for him to deliver to you two vials of Polyjuice Potion from his private stores. If I am correct, he will have likely brewed some for his sixth year Potions students.”

The look of confusion on Malfoy’s face quickly passed. “It will be done.”

“There is more,” Voldemort said sharply. “Tomorrow, I want you to go to the Ministry and speak to one Cassius Croaker. Offer to invite him for lunch on August 14th. As he walks away from you, wordlessly Summon three hairs from his head. Make sure you are not seen while doing this.”

“A simple task, my Lord, but did you not want me at Potter’s trial?”

“Potter’s trial is meaningless now,” Voldemort said with a wave of his hand. “My plan has changed.”

His lipless mouth curled into a grin of satisfaction, his eyes gleaming red with triumph. “It is time,” he hissed, his voice carrying through the entire hall, “to take matters into my own hands.”

Author's Note: sorry about the wait, but here's the thrilling next chapter of my story. Hope everyone enjoys it! Once again, read, review, and enjoy!

The alarm clock only managed to let out a single shrill note before Harry's hand closed over it. With a groan, he quickly shut it off and set it back onto his bedside table. I don't care what Sirius thinks, he thought savagely to himself as he dragged his legs out of bed, I don't want to be getting up at six in the bloody morning!

He understood the reasoning that Sirius and Tonks had provided, even though he didn't entirely agree with it. Sure, there might be less traffic at the bank at this time in the morning, but that means that the goblins won't be distracted by customers... hell, this is tricky anyway I think of it...

It didn't take him long to get ready. He had decided on Muggle clothes – it wasn't like he had many choices in that department – and he already possessed the few other tools that he knew would be essential. Wand, Invisibility Cloak, that knife from Sirius, one of Fred's fireworks... this should be good, I think.

Ron gave a tremendous grunt from the bed. Harry paused as he looked at his snoring friend. It's better that he doesn't know, he finally thought, putting his hand on the doorknob. The less people know, the better, and I don't Ron dragged into this... especially considering the fact that he'd likely tell his father, and Mr. Weasley would tell Dumbledore. Then I wouldn't have a chance. He hadn't told Hermione for the same reasons, but to his surprise, he felt surprisingly less guilty. It makes sense, in a twisted sort of way, he reasoned, that I'm feeling worse about Hermione than Ron – after all, Hermione wouldn't hesitate to tell Dumbledore herself.

Swallowing the lump of guilt in his throat – and the bile that came with it – he silently unlocked the door and slid out, quietly descending the stairs.

Sirius and Tonks were already sitting at the table with a stack of toast. Much to Harry's shock, Lupin was nursing a cup of coffee by the counter.

“Harry!” the former professor said, startled as he saw Harry freeze on the staircase. “What are you doing up so early?”

Harry threw a furious look at Sirius. “I thought you said –”

“There was nothing I could do about it, Harry,” Sirius cut him off quietly, not meeting his godson’s eyes. “He doesn’t know yet.”

“Good, because that’s the way it’s going to stay,” Harry replied coldly, even as a pang of disgust shot through his heart. I’m so sorry, Lupin, but I know better than anyone that I can’t trust you with this...

“Are you going somewhere?” Lupin asked, setting his coffee mug down on the counter with a hollow clink. “Is that why Tonks is here?”

“Couldn’t you have just believed it when I told you I got off duty late?” Tonks asked with exasperation.

“Professor,” Harry said with frustration, walking up to the table and sitting down heavily, “I can’t tell you. It’s nothing that you’ve done... hell, that’s exactly it. You have done nothing, and that’s the reason I can’t trust you with this, one way or another.”

Lupin went pale, as if Harry had clubbed him across the face. “Harry, when have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?”

“I don’t know, maybe it’s been when you’ve been sitting on the fence through this whole mess, giving me exactly nothing,” Harry replied curtly. “No help, no support, not even a strong objection to anything I’ve said!”

Lupin looked as if he had been slapped. “I’ve always been on your side, Harry!”

“Whenever it hasn’t conflicted with Dumbledore’s,” Harry replied bitingly.

“Harry,” Sirius began. “We shouldn’t start this –”

“You’re absolutely right, Sirius, we shouldn’t start this,” Harry said, his eyes still fixed on his former Defense Professor. “We shouldn’t have had to start this. But now it’s started, and I can’t afford to back down now.” He pulled a piece of toast off of the stack and began slathering margarine on it. “So how about it, Professor?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say –”

“Say something!” Harry snarled, getting to his feet. “Anything, damn it! Have a Merlin-forsaken opinion for yourself for once!”

Tonks looked quickly at Harry, a peculiar look on her face as she glanced back and forth between him, a white-faced Lupin, and Sirius, who was watching Harry with concern and frustration written across his face.

“Shouldn’t...” she began, trying to keep her tone light and cut through the tension in the room, “shouldn’t we, ah, get going?”

“Absolutely,” Harry replied flatly, finally turning away from Lupin as he pulled another slice of toast from the pile. “Come on, Tonks, let’s go before this gets ugly.”

“Harry...” Lupin whispered. “What happened to you? What did I do?”

Harry turned back at the edge of the stairwell only to give a bitter laugh. “Real life, in all of its brutal honesty, happened to me, Professor. Be sure to send word when it happens to you.”

And with that, he headed up the stairs. Tonks, her hair colour shifting from bright pink to a dark shade of magenta, followed, glancing back once at the two men in the kitchen behind them.

* * *

“Do you know where they’re going?” Lupin asked quietly.

Sirius nodded as he took a swig from his goblet. "Yes."

"And you're not going to tell me?"

"I swore to Harry that I wouldn't."

"He's putting himself in danger again, isn't he?"

"Depends how you classify danger," Sirius replied evasively as he picked up the paper.

"This hasn't something to do with that plan he was talking about two days ago, doesn't it? Something to do with Scrimgeour –"

Sirius tossed down his paper and glowered up at his closest friend. "Look, Moony, what do you want me to say? I swore to Harry that I wouldn't tell anyone he couldn't trust, and you're in that group. It's his plan, not mine. I just helped iron out a few of the wrinkles with Tonks, that's it."

"Does Dumbledore know?" Lupin asked, a trace of anxiousness in his voice. "What about Ron, Hermione?"

Sirius gave a bitter chuckle. "What do you think?"

Lupin could only gape with mingled shock and horror. "He doesn't trust them either? What the hell happened to him?"

Sirius turned away. "Nothing that you, or me, or Dumbledore couldn't have seen coming. I just caught onto it a little quicker," he muttered as he picked up the paper, unable to stop the flicker of concern as he imagined the headline that would be emblazoned across it if Harry was caught in Gringotts.

* * *

"I really think," Harry muttered, rubbing the side of his head, "that I prefer brooms to Side-Along Apparition. Where are we, anyways?"

“One of Tom’s little-used storerooms at the back of the Leaky Cauldron,” Tonks whispered back, nearly tripping over a box protruding from one of the cabinets lining the walls. “We’ve got a few minutes here so we can plan our next move –”

“Why don’t you tell me why Professor Lupin was waiting for me this morning?” Harry asked coolly, his hand slowly drifting towards his wand in his pocket.

Tonks shook her head adamantly. “Nothing to do with that, honestly. Frankly, I was surprised he was up too – the full moon’s coming up, and I would have expected him to be resting before it. It must have been a fluke.”

“It better have been,” Harry muttered darkly, as he withdrew his Invisibility Cloak from the briefcase that Tonks had flipped open. “If we’ve got a leak already...”

“Let’s just focus on the mission,” Tonks said bracingly, as she pulled out her own wand and lightly twirled it in her hand. “Right, so you know I’m a Metamorphmagus? I told you over dinner last night.”

“You showed me over dinner, if that’s what you mean,” Harry said with a slight smile. “So that means...”

Tonks smiled and tossed her hair back and in the space of a blink, the vivid shades of bubblegum pink had turned a shimmering white blond. Harry was unpleasantly reminded of Malfoy. It had also lengthened nearly a foot, extending far past her shoulders and cascading down her back.

Harry whistled. “Well, that’ll throw off pursuit quickly enough.”

“Not enough yet, though,” Tonks said with a frown. Screwing up her face, she concentrated for a few seconds, and to Harry’s complete amazement, the Auror seemed to grow at least two inches and fill out significantly. He quickly tore his eyes away as he flushed with mortification. This could get awkward...

Tonks chuckled as she saw Harry's embarrassment. "What's bothering you so much, Harry?"

"N-nothing," he said, quickly turning back and keeping his eyes firmly on Tonks' face, which barely even resembled her original appearance. If it wasn't for the mischievous look on her face, Harry wouldn't have even recognized her. "You... you just look like..."

The young woman snorted. "A younger, sexier version of Narcissa Malfoy, I know."

Harry went red. "Not what I was going to say! It's just... well, do you think it's all necessary?" he lamely finished.

"Trust me, Harry," Tonks replied with a sly wink as she slid her wand into a small pocket of her fine, expensive robes – robes that Harry hadn't noticed before wearing before, but ones that made sense with her disguise, "more people will be focusing on my assets than me personally. It's an advantage... and sometimes as an Auror, you've got to take any advantage you're given."

Harry immediately seized the opportunity to pull the conversation back to comfortable territory. "And we'll need as many advantages as we can if we want to pull this one off. Let's go over the plan one last time."

Tonks nodded, a slow grin spreading on her face. "You get under your Cloak and follow me through Diagon Alley to Gringotts. I'll approach the teller while you head towards the stairs on the far right side of the hall. Four flights up, down the white marble corridor, up another two staircases to the paneled and carpeted hallways –"

"And down to the fifth door on the right after the first turn," Harry finished, nodding quickly. "That should be Vesparian Welmon's office. Not sure how that's going to work out – best case scenario is if he steps out, but I can bluff if I need to. Worst case scenario is that I place a Confundus Charm on him."

"You know that charm?" Tonks asked with surprise.

“I trained for months for that damned maze,” Harry replied, iron in his voice. “You’d be surprised what I learned. Won’t be able to put a Memory Charm on him, though.”

“That’s N.E.W.T. level magic, I’d hardly expect it.”

“So presuming I find the papers I want, the next stop is deep storage,” Harry continued, taking a deep breath. “That’s three flights downstairs, past the archivist desk, and down the dusty hallway on the left by the dragon statue.”

“You can’t rely on that,” Tonks warned. “First rule as an Auror is not to rely on landmarks like a statue or a tree – too easily moved or shifted to another location. Now, considering that the goblins that run Gringotts pride themselves on stability, the odds of that are fairly low, but it still could be possible. Now once you get the papers –”

“I meet you by the fourth teller on the right side of the hall at precisely one thirty seven P.M.,” Harry finished. “Honestly, I still think we’re overestimating the time it’s going to take for me to finish this.”

“You haven’t seen the deep records storage yet. From everything I’ve heard, you could be in there for hours trying to find those papers.”

“But what if I’m finished early?” Harry asked worriedly. “You already said that you planned to head into Diagon Alley to not attract attention. How on earth am I to contact you early?”

Tonks smiled widely as she reached into the case and pulled out a tiny package wrapped in parchment. With a frown, Harry unfolded the paper to reveal a small, dirty mirror.

“Sirius gave them to me,” she explained at Harry’s look of confusion. “They’re a pair – you and I can communicate through them. Just speak my name – my fake name, mind you – into the mirror, and I’ll make my way over to Gringotts as quickly as I can.”

“Wait, you have a fake name?” Harry’s eyebrows shot straight into his hair.

“I’ve got a full cover that Sirius and I cooked up,” Tonks said proudly. “Nymphadora Vuneren, of the notoriously reclusive Vuneren pureblood family, here to discuss several international real estate transactions and investments in Corsica and Sicily. Fabulously rich and enterprisingly single – the perfect distraction for a possessive and greedy banker, human or goblin.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m sure. I can see Sirius’ fingerprints all over this.”

“Hey, occasionally he does have good taste!”

“Can you pull it off?”

Tonks fluttered her long eyelashes flirtatiously. “My cover is flawless, just like every other inch of me, Harry,” she said in a sultry voice that made Harry go red again, prompting another mischievous laugh from the young Auror.

“Will the twins be ready?” Harry asked at a frown, dragging the conversation back to the mission. “That’s my concern, not whether or not my cover’s in various states of flawlessness.”

“They both stayed at the Leaky Cauldron last night,” Tonks said with a crafty smile. “Didn’t you notice that the house was quieter last night?”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I honestly thought they went back to the Burrow – isn’t that what they told Mr. Weasley?”

“I don’t think they even bothered to tell him,” Tonks said thoughtfully. “In any case, they’ll be ready with the distraction the second we step out of Gringotts. You’ve got the firework they gave you in case you need a last ditch distraction?”

Harry cautiously patted his pocket. "I'm honestly hoping I won't have to use it or my wand – can't the Ministry track who's using underage magic anyways?"

"The Trace will detect the magic, but not the user," Tonks said, blowing out an unsteady breath. "And you can bet the goblins won't let Ministry investigators into their bank without a substantial – and I mean substantial – warrant. They don't want to risk an incident with the goblins, especially over Gringotts."

"Right," Harry said, lightly shaking out his Invisibility Cloak. "Okay, so are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Tonks said lightly. "Relax, Harry, I've done this before – top marks in Disguise and Concealment in the Auror Department, remember?"

"Nearly failing Stealth and Tracking, though," Harry remarked wryly, tossing the cloak over his shoulders and trying to ignore the nervous roil of his gut.

Tonks looked like she was going to protest, but Harry was already chuckling under his breath when he threw the Cloak over his head, vanishing completely.

"All right, then, Harry, let's go," Tonks said to the apparently empty room. Then, drawing herself up with an imperious sniff (one that nearly made Harry choke on his laughter, even despite his nervousness), she strode out of the room, Harry sliding silently behind her.

The Leaky Cauldron still had a fair number of patrons, even early in the morning, and Harry narrowly avoided stepping on people as he crossed the room behind Tonks. Several people were shying away from the Auror, whose rich appearance and disdainful sneer was driving away everyone in her path. She's playing her role well, Harry noted with a degree of mild surprise and satisfaction. Given how not serious she is, I'm surprised she's doing so well...

After a few tense seconds, they had reached the back of the tiny pub, and with a few careful taps of her wand, the archway into Diagon Alley slid open from the brick wall. Taking another disdainful sniff, Tonks began to walk down the narrow street, her invisible shadow keeping close behind.

The alley, much to Harry's surprise, wasn't packed full of people like it usually was. There were a few older witches walking down the alley, bickering with each other about cats and the higher prices of purified belladonna, but for the most part, Diagon Alley seemed relatively quiet.

The hairs on the back of Harry's arms were standing up. Something's gone wrong... the Ministry's been tipped off somehow... could Tonks have betrayed me?

Keeping a firm hand on his cloak, he cautiously pulled his wand out and leveled it at her back, in case she made any sudden motions. He only needed her until they got to Gringotts, after all. The twins can Apparate now too... if I need to, I'll just find them when I leave...

Tonks suddenly stopped, nearly causing a startled Harry to bump into her. Reaching into her robes, she pulled out a small hand mirror – an exact match to Harry's. Pretending to be examining her makeup, she quickly whispered into her mirror.

"Something's gone wrong. I'm going to pick up the pace – as soon as I get to Gringotts, I'm going to continue down Diagon Alley and see what I can find out," she whispered, barely moving her lips.

"All right," Harry breathed back, his voice barely audible as he hurriedly shoved his own mirror back into his pocket and continued to follow Tonks. He was already breathing more heavily as his nervousness and suspicion boiled together in his gut. Things are starting to go off-track... this could get bad really fast...

Keeping his hand tightly wrapped around the hem of his Invisibility Cloak as the massive Gringotts building came into view, Harry worked on keeping his footsteps as silent as possible. Despite the

fact that Diagon Alley usually was raucous and noisy, he knew that unexplained sounds or feelings in the wizarding world seldom went over well. He remembered with a pang the Chamber of Secrets incident, where he was the only one that could hear the basilisk. I was an outcast then because everyone thought I was the Heir of Slytherin, he thought, swallowing hard, but now something has changed...

Tonks, looking every inch the rich, pureblood aristocrat, lightly ascended the stairs towards Gringotts, her imperious stare raking the goblins that hastily bowed deeply at her passing. Taking a deep breath, Harry darted quickly behind her, trying not to make a sound in the narrow doorway.

One of the goblins halted suddenly in mid bow, his beady eyes raking Tonks suspiciously, and Harry's heart nearly leapt in his chest. He continued to creep forward towards the next set of double doors, as close to Tonks as he dared, nearly treading on the hem of her robe. If I stay close enough, maybe the goblins will just assume that it's Tonks... unless they can see through Invisibility Cloaks and they already know... no, Sirius would have mentioned that... by god, why the hell did these blasted goblins put in marble floors!

"Something up, Rictor?" one of the goblins growled, his eyes finally leaving Tonks and turning to his fellow goblin – the one that had frozen in mid bow.

"It's nothing," the other goblin replied darkly, shaking his head and muttering under his breath in Gobbledegook.

Harry let out a slow breath as he watched Tonks slide gracefully towards the counter. She's in position, he thought with relief as he began crossing the center of the hall, shaking with the aftermath of the near-discovery. Now to find those stairs...

But to his surprise (and relief), he spotted the stairs very quickly and made a beeline towards them, trying to keep his footsteps as silent as possible as he walked. There were dozens of goblins in the main hall of the room, carrying ledgers, bags of gold, treasure chests, or nasty-

looking knives, and Harry knew, with his heart hammering in his chest, that it would only take one to discover him. It's almost like playing a game of Quidditch, he thought suddenly, with a hundred more Bludgers...

Finally, after an agonizing few minutes of careful motions across the floor (all the more dangerous, considering that he had to make sure his Cloak didn't flap up and reveal his feet to the shorter goblins), he finally reached the staircase – thankfully deserted. Swallowing hard, Harry began climbing the spiral staircase, flattening himself tightly to the wall any time a goblin descended. He slowly began counting the number of stairwells as he climbed. After all, I don't want to get lost in here...I don't think the goblins would take it too well if they found an unexpected intruder, even if it is the Boy-Who-Lived...

The four flights of stairs – surprisingly steep, given the goblins' short stature – ended quite quickly, and Harry instantly spotted the large, arched corridor made of white marble. To his surprise, Harry saw a number of humans, wearing business robes, pacing and talking in the corridor, but not a single goblin. Taking another deep breath (careful that there was nobody who could hear it), he inched slowly down the hallway, sliding towards the right edge of the corridor, pausing behind massive columns before sliding further along the wall.

He realized, rather suddenly, how incredibly noisy the hallway was, compared to the rest of Gringotts. Harry could hear a din of voices, and snippets of a dozen different conversations.

“Well, it's not my fault that –”

“At an interest rate of six percent, it's hardly worth investing –”

“I don't think Magical Finance will have a problem –”

“No bloody way! A whole dragon –”

“It will be a pleasure doing business with you, Yarone.”

Harry froze suddenly as a surge of terror flooded through him; he recognized that voice, one he didn't have any desire to hear on a secret mission into unfamiliar territory. But with the fear came a surge of rage. How he can even dare show his face –

“As I said, Mr. Malfoy, it should not be a problem transferring the assets to the appropriate, ah, jurisdiction,” a massive, bespectacled lump of a man in a brown waistcoat said obsequiously, nodding his heavysset head deeply.

“See to it that there isn't,” Lucius Malfoy said coldly, his long black robes billowing slightly as he continued to walk. “I've got an appointment at the Ministry in less than an hour, and I do not wish to be delayed in this, particularly if such problems can be avoided. And I have no desire to deal with any of that ruckus happening outside of Flourish & Blotts this morning – or to be connected to it whatsoever. See to it that the funds reach the correct hands at the Prophet...”

Harry couldn't hear anymore, but his mind was churning as he flattened himself tightly against the wall as another group of arguing Gringotts employees walked by. Well, it makes sense, in a twisted sort of way, why Tonks and I didn't see many people this morning. If there's something happening outside of Flourish & Blotts... and if Malfoy doesn't want to get involved... this could be interesting indeed, especially if Voldemort's involved...

He reached the end of the hallway with a few more steps and quickly ascended the next two flights of stairs. To his astonishment, the loud noise from the hallway below seemed to completely vanish as he entered the narrow hallway, paneled with dark wood that Harry didn't recognize and carpeted a deep, plush shade of red. He breathed a little easier when he saw that the hallway was deserted.

Now it's the fifth door on the right, Harry thought to himself as he kept a firm hand over his Invisibility Cloak. Please be empty, please be empty...

He reached the heavy wooden door and quickly read the narrow gold cursive lettering across it. “Vesperian Welmon, pureblood

accountant,” Harry whispered to himself, slowly placing his hand over the knob. Taking a deep breath, he slowly began to turn the handle.

It was locked.

Harry blew out a quick frustrated breath as he reached deep into his pocket and pulled out the penknife that Sirius had given him last Christmas. Guess you were right after all when you said it would be a good idea to bring this, Sirius, he thought wryly as he carefully slid it into the tiny gap between the door and the frame. Steadying his shaking hand, he slowly began to slide it down the side of the frame.

There was an audible click, and Harry breathed a little easier as he quickly stowed the knife and drew his wand instead. Carefully placing his hand on the knob, he gave it a quick twist and shoved it a bit with the edge of his shoe.

“The more polite thing would have been to knock,” a harassed, razor-sharp voice said, and Harry froze, letting the door slowly open. He quickly darted into the room as the heavy-set man in the chair, dressed in a crisp (if outdated) brown suit got up and approached the door, Harry frantically edging across the paneled wall as quickly as he could.

The man looked irritably down the hallways quickly before shutting his door with a disgusted grunt. “Bloody useless interns...” Locking it quickly with a twist of his hand, he went back to his desk, straightened his narrow, gold-rimmed glasses, and returned to his ledger.

Harry was at a loss. From his perspective, the man (who he strongly suspected was Vesparian Welmon, from Sirius’ description) didn’t look like he was planning to leave any time soon. I’m stuck in his office, invisible, unless he plans to go for lunch... but if Tonks is right and the archive room takes longer than I thought, I can’t afford to be held up here... and that’ll mean I’m confronting Welmon personally.

Harry quickly scanned the office – remarkably austere, with the rich wood cabinets and polished desk the only signs of prosperity in the office – and tried to locate Welmon’s wand. Damn, it looks like he’s

carrying it on him... that'll mean I'll have to rely on threats and bluffs if I want to keep him on edge without using magic... better move sooner rather than later, though, in case somebody comes in...

Welmon swore under his breath and furiously scratched a number from his ledger with his quill. "Damned rich fools can't keep their finances in order or even submit good documentation –"

"Not like you, then," Harry said grimly, a firm hand on his Invisibility Cloak as he threw it back, becoming suddenly visible.

Welmon snapped up and his hand moved towards his waistcoat, but Harry's wand was already pointing directly at Welmon's head.

"Where is your wand?" Harry growled.

Welmon was breathing very quickly, but he quickly motioned towards the inside pocket of his waistcoat. Still keeping his wand firmly fixed on the accountant, Harry deftly yanked the wand free and pocketed it.

"I'm not the person to rob if you want anything of value, sir," Welmon said stiffly.

"I'm not trying to rob you," Harry said, inclining his head to look into the accountant's eyes, which widened instantly at the sight of Harry's scar. "You just have something I want."

"I – I thought you were in Ministry custody!" the man stammered.

"Says a lot about their security, then, doesn't it?" Harry sneered, tapping Welmon lightly on the head. "I assume you read the Prophet, then?"

Welmon nodded sharply.

"Good. Then you'll know what I'll do if you cause me problems," Harry said icily. "Hopefully, that won't happen. Trust me, I have no desire to do this, but circumstances are dire at the moment, and I need information."

“I won’t tell you anything,” Welmon snarled, “and you’ll never get out of Gringotts with anything either.”

“You obviously have no idea what I’m capable of,” Harry said dangerously. “Heard of the Triwizard Tournament last year? I got through it alive, didn’t I? And I’m in a bit of a situation, so I’m not inclined to be charitable either. All I need is information, and if you give it to me, I’ll leave and you won’t have to hear from me again. You can claim I took it from you by force.”

Welmon’s eyes narrowed. “What on earth do you want from me?”

“You worked on the Cygnus Black-Druella Rosier marriage, didn’t you?” Harry asked. Here it goes...

Welmon frowned. “I did.”

“Who was the other accountant that worked with you, representing the Rosiers in the dowry papers?”

Welmon’s brow furrowed. “That was decades ago, Potter! I was less than an intern then, only handling the minor books! How on earth am I supposed to know?”

“Because his name will be on the papers, and you’re an obsessive record-keeper,” Harry growled. “And even if you were less than an intern, you know who managed the Rosier accounts.”

“The Rosier accounts were all closed over a decade ago with the end of the male line!” Welmon said hotly. “How is that even relevant to anything?”

Harry leaned forward over the desk, cold fury burning in his eyes. “And you know who the one that closed the accounts was, and you have documentation to prove it. His name, please.”

“He’s dead,” Welmon said, smug and triumphant. “Keaton Matthis died eight years ago – I was at his funeral. You can’t touch him, Harry Potter.”

Harry sighed internally. Finally, a name. “I had no desire to go after him,” he said evenly, “but I do require proof that he was the one who worked for the Rosiers. And you have that data.” He motioned with his wand. “I want to see a paper.”

Welmon unsteadily got up and approached a cabinet in the corner. Looking shrewdly at Harry, he pulled out a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the drawer. Sliding it open with practiced ease, he pulled a file out, flipped through it quickly, and withdrew a single paper.

“This should be proof enough for you,” Welmon said, his confusion warring with fury in his voice. “It’s one of the older papers relating to the dowry –”

“Put it on the desk,” Harry ordered, pointing at the desk with his free hand.

Welmon swallowed hard and carefully placed the paper on the desk. Keeping his wand pointed at the accountant, he quickly scanned the paper. Surely enough, in the list of the accountants, right above Welmon’s name, was the name Keaton Matthis, with the subtext ‘representing the Rosiers.’

Perfect, Harry thought as he slid the paper back towards the accountant. “It’ll do.”

“Is that all?” Welmon asked slowly, slightly confused as Harry pulled out the accountant’s wand.

“I said that would do,” Harry replied irritably, but then he froze. “Why do you ask, Welmon? Should that be all?”

Welmon looked around quickly. “I... I... thought you might –”

“Might do what, Welmon?” Harry growled, stepping closer and raising his wand higher. “Something you want to tell me?”

“I t-thought you might have been here about the Potter accounts!” Welmon sputtered, his face going red as Harry raised the wand a little closer.

Harry gave a mirthless laugh. “Potter accounts? My parents already left me everything in my vault!”

“The Potters had more than that,” Welmon mumbled.

“Speak up!” Harry snarled. “What did you just say?”

“The Potter family had money – hell, they were one of the most prominent pureblood families in the United Kingdom!” Welmon said frantically, the first true fear Harry had seen crossing his face. “Your vault only has the trust fund they left for you. The rest of the Potter assets, given the great confusion after the deaths of your parents –”

“Where are they?” Harry growled. He hadn’t planned on this, but he wasn’t going to walk away from money that his parents had left him. The real question is why I didn’t know about this earlier. Dumbledore and Hagrid must have had a very good reason for not telling me...

“The Potter accounts were closed years ago on executive orders from the Ministry!” Welmon said hurriedly as Harry stepped even closer. “There was an appeal, but the Potter vaults were sealed fourteen years ago!”

“And who was the imbecile who handled the Potter finances and allowed the vaults to be sealed?” Harry snarled. “A name, Welmon!”

“Miguel Prince,” Welmon said quickly, hastily wiping his face with the sleeve of his waistcoat. “I swear, that was him!”

“Is he still alive?”

“Died five years ago,” Welmon replied, swallowing hard. Harry’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “I swear, that was it!”

“And how,” Harry said, his tone shaking with barely contained fury, “would I access those vaults?”

Welmon swallowed hard again. “I... I don’t know. Please, I don’t know anything about the Potter accounts, Prince handled everything! Don’t hurt me, please!”

Harry gave a disgusted sigh as he walked towards the door, picking up his Invisibility Cloak from the plush carpet as he walked. “Why would I bother? You gave me what I wanted.”

“Y-you’re leaving?” Welmon asked, stepping closer to his desk.

Harry shrugged listlessly, the names of the two dead Gringotts accounts ringing in his mind. Keaton Matthis. Miguel Prince. I’ll remember those names. “You gave me what I wanted.”

“You... you know you’ll never get out of Gringotts with –”

Harry gave a sharp, bitter laugh. “Underestimating me already, Welmon? Guess you won’t be the one handling my accounts. And you can call the guards or the Ministry if you want – they’ll never find me.” It was a bluff and he knew it, but the fear on Welmon’s face already told Harry that the accountant wasn’t likely to tell anybody anything. After all, he thought suddenly, who would believe him?

Tossing the man’s wand on the floor, he drew his Invisibility Cloak up over his head and unlocked the door with a twist of the knob. Then, putting his hand to his head in an attempt to stop the raging headache that was threatening to blossom there, he slid out into the paneled hallway.

* * *

“Nymphadora?”

Tonks froze suddenly, and her hand shifted quickly from the gorgeous dress robes on the rack in front of her to the small pocket in her robes. “Who’s calling?” she whispered to the mirror as she brought it quickly to her face.

“Who do you think?” Harry replied, his face not showing in the mirror, but she expected this, if he was under his Invisibility Cloak.

“Thought Sirius told you to call me Tonks,” she said wryly as she slid into a corner of the elegantly appointed store. After the trip to Gringotts, she had decided to indulge herself in the most convenient thing for a rich, pureblood girl to do in Diagon Alley, and that was to go shopping. And it’s a damned good cover, too, she thought to herself as she surveyed Twilfit & Taddings, the store she was currently visiting.

“Thought you told me to call you by your cover name,” Harry replied, strain in his voice. “I’ve dealt with Welmon – he knows I’m in Gringotts.”

“Did he cooperate?” Tonks whispered, instantly alert.

“As much as one could suspect... look, he wasn’t too friendly at the beginning, but it’s not like he can say much. I’ve got the names.”

“I thought you were just looking for one,” Tonks said, confused. “What changed? Did you find out more?”

“Nah, the second name is that of the accountant who closed the Potter vaults,” Harry growled. “Know anything about that, Tonks?”

Tonks’ eyes were wide. “Harry, I didn’t even know the Potters well at all – my folks never joined the Order officially. As for the vaults... sorry, Harry, I don’t know anything.”

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. “That’ll be something to ask Dumbledore about after I’m cleared,” he muttered. “In any case, I’m at the doors of the deep storage, and I’m going to be going in soon.

I'll call again before I leave. About my exit... what was going on outside Flourish & Blotts?"

Tonks gave a disgusted snort. "Bunch of old warlocks protesting the new release of some new history book. Caused a considerable ruckus about it too, and there was quite the riot over there. I just stayed away from it, and I'm thinking that it's died down by now."

"Any luck hearing from the twins?"

"Not yet, but I'm scheduled to meet them in the Leaky Cauldron in about a half hour."

"Get there early and talk to them – I don't know how long Welmon's going to last before he cracks and tells somebody that there's an escaped criminal in the bank." Harry's voice was grim. "I'm running out of time, and I'm not going to get caught without the information I need."

The mirror went dark, and Tonks blew out a low breath. With a last longing gaze at the dress robes she was looking at, she headed towards the front of the store and the narrow, more crowded street outside.

* * *

It's actually pathetic, really, Harry thought as he slowly opened the door to the deep storage archive, that I can break into the financial records of Gringotts with a cheap penknife and an Invisibility Cloak. I honestly thought Gringotts' security was a bit better than this... then again, most people who are trying to steal something go straight to the vaults, not to mouldy old financial documents...

Carefully shutting the door behind him, careful to make sure it didn't close on his cloak, he stifled a sneeze as he looked across the massive chamber. With high, paneled shelves like the Hogwarts library, it was filled with ledgers, massive tomes, and box after box of carefully labeled boxes that Harry guessed were filled with files of folders. Everything was covered in dust and dirt, and Harry could

barely restrain another sneeze as he stepped deeper into the archive. Tonks and Sirius were right, Harry thought with a pang of despair. This could take hours...

Drawing his wand carefully, he moved along the main aisle, his eyes noting the yellowed signs along each shelf. Hmm... at least all these damned shelves are set up alphabetically by accountant, not chronologically... that would have been a nightmare. Maybe this won't be as bad as they think... all I really need to do is find the right aisle...

Suddenly, out of the darkness, Harry heard a voice and froze – a female voice, incredibly familiar –

“Can I help –”

“That depends on whether or not you can be trusted,” Harry said grimly, tossing back his Cloak as he pointed his wand at the young woman sitting in the chair behind the tiny desk along the wall – a desk he had walked past without even noticing. Silently cursing his stupidity, he raised his wand a little higher. “Well, Fleur? I can only assume you've read the Prophet?”

Fleur Delacour tossed back her silvery-white hair as she got to her feet. Her typical haughty demeanor was mixed with confusion and a surprising expression of frustration. “Really, it depends on why you are here, ‘Arry,” she said coolly. Her French accent was still discernable, but her English was far better than Harry could have expected. Well, if she's been here for a month working with people, it wouldn't be surprising that she picked up English quickly...

Harry cocked an eyebrow. “Your first question is not how I got in, but why?”

Fleur smiled slightly. “You got through the Triwizard Tournament, and I know you are not incompetent, and you have that Cloak – a true beauty, by the way – so I can discern the ‘how.’ The why, however, brings some, ah, questions.”

Harry breathed out quickly. "I need papers... documents from two dead accountants. For my court case," he said slowly.

Fleur frowned. "Why?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't tell you. Don't suppose you could help me?" he added off-hand, frustration leaking into his own voice.

Fleur surveyed him for a long few seconds. "I could," she said finally, "but I must know the names."

What? Harry was thrown off-guard – he hadn't expected Fleur to cooperate at all. "You – you'll help –"

"The goblins," Fleur spat, "assigned me here when I came to Gringotts, and it has been terrible. The accountants and interns wanted me upstairs, but the goblins run the bank. Placed in charge of papers that need no caretaker – entirely useless."

"But aren't you, like, part-Veela?" Harry asked with confusion as Fleur came around the other side of the desk.

"And they noticed first," Fleur said shortly with disgust. "And goblins are just as prejudiced as wizards, if not more. What are the names, 'Arry?"

"Uh... well, the first is Keaton Matthis, and the other is Miguel Prince," Harry said, still slightly startled that Fleur was helping. "So... what do you do –"

"I find required files for the accountants and goblins," Fleur said stiffly as she drew her wand, "and nothing else. You are the first living thing I've seen all day."

Harry winced. "Why are you even still working here? You've got more talent than this, and surely if you're trying to improve your English – which doesn't need much work, by the way –you want to be talking to people."

“It pays well,” Fleur said with a shrug as they began walking down the main aisle, silently flicking her wand at the massive shelves next to her. “And they did offer first.”

She’s a Triwizard champion, and she’s stuck watching boxes of papers, Harry thought, anger flooding into his gut. She does deserve better than this...

They took a turn down a particularly dusty aisle and Fleur stopped at a small box that seemed to be glowing with a faint, milk-white light. “This,” she said slowly, “is the first of this Matthis’ boxes.”

“How many more?” Harry asked.

“The next four shelves of boxes, and eight boxes after that in the next aisle,” she replied.

Harry’s heart sank. “That’ll take more time than I have.”

“Looking for something in particular?” Fleur asked curiously.

“A transaction record, or something that might be related to the closure of the Rosier account,” Harry replied desperately. “Any way you can search for that?”

Fleur muttered a few words under her breath and gave her thin wand a delicate flick. White light began to stream from two more boxes on adjacent shelves. “The transaction record’s in that box,” she said, pointing at the box with her wand, “while information on the Rosier account once Matthis took over are in that box.”

“Perfect,” Harry said with relief as he pulled the boxes down and flipped them open. He eagerly flipped through the stacked files until, at the very bottom of the second box, he found a plain grey folder filled with dozens of crumpled papers – and to Harry’s surprise, newspaper cuttings.

Fleur frowned. “What, exactly, is that? That’s not a Gringotts file.”

“It’s what I’m looking for,” Harry breathed with triumph as he flipped through the file to the first piece of parchment – a letter in official-looking text, from the Auror Department to one Keaton Matthis, signed by Auror Rufus Scrimgeour. If Fleur’s spell is good, this could be exactly what I need to blackmail Scrimgeour...

He looked up quickly. “Mind if I take this, Fleur?” He gestured to the file. “I need these papers.”

“It’s not a Gringotts file,” Fleur said with distaste. “Part of my job is to dispose of those kinds of papers whenever I find them – too many accountants kept complete nonsense in their boxes, cluttering our archives unnecessarily.”

“So I can keep it?” Harry persisted.

“I don’t see why not,” Fleur replied with an easy shrug. “Besides, ‘Arry, I still owe you a significant debt for saving my sister in the lake – and I would do much to help a friend.”

Harry flushed red at Fleur’s words and small smile. “You have no idea how much this means to me, Fleur. Thank you so much. I won’t forget this.”

Carefully placing the lid back on the box, Fleur shoved the box back into its position. “We should likely hurry, I think. If you have little time –”

“The name’s Miguel Prince,” Harry said quickly, getting to his feet. Fleur nodded and muttered a few words under her breath with another wave of her wand. Quickly tucking the file into the bag slung over his shoulder, Harry followed Fleur down another aisle to where another box was glowing.

“That’s some impressive magic,” Harry said, genuinely impressed. “Where did you learn those?”

“Beauxbatons had a large library, and I didn’t always have a lot of time,” Fleur replied with a shrug. “They are useful charms.”

“My friend Hermione would love them. You really do deserve better than this job.”

“Merci, ‘Arry, but until my English is better, it will very difficult to get a job outside of this —”

“That’s rubbish,” Harry said bluntly. “Your English is great, and I’m sure anybody would be happy to have you. Is there any way you can find the records around the closure and sealing of the Potter vaults?”

Fleur muttered a few more words and another box began to glow softly. His heart hammering in his chest, Harry yanked open the box, only to see a bright red glow erupting from a single, thick file halfway through the stack. Pulling it out and hastily shoving it into his bag, he got to his feet.

Fleur’s eyes narrowed. “‘Arry, unlike the last, that is a Gringotts file, and it can’t be taken from the bank.”

“It’s also filled with information about my parents, and I’m not passing that up,” Harry replied, looking back at Fleur defiantly. “I can’t afford to leave it behind, and I might not get a chance to see it again.”

“I can’t —”

“Fleur, I don’t have time to waste here,” Harry said, shaking out his Invisibility Cloak, sending dust flying everywhere. “I need that file, Fleur. Please,” he added, his hand tightening on the handle of his wand. “And besides, it’s not like anybody will ever know that it’s gone.”

“I will,” Fleur said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“And you will know that I’m doing this for family, for the right reasons,” Harry said quickly. “Please, Fleur, don’t mention it — this is personal.”

She looked at him for a few seconds before sighing. “Je comprend, ‘Arry. Take it.”

There was a sudden bang at the door, and Harry swore under his breath. Fleur’s wand was out in a flash while Harry pulled on his Invisibility Cloak.

“How can I get out of here?” he whispered quickly, his heart already hammering. If the goblins are searching for me, this could get ugly...

“There is an emergency stairwell at the side of the hall,” Fleur whispered back quickly. “Follow it down all the way to the ground floor, take the third corridor, and you’ll be at the far side of the main hall.” Suddenly, she threw a startled Harry her wand. “Quickly, Stun me!”

“What –”

“I can’t be seen to have collaborated with you,” she hissed back quickly. “Stun me, throw away my wand, and run!”

“But the Trace –”

“That’s why I gave you my wand, ‘Arry!” Fleur quickly looked behind her, and Harry saw, to his horror, that there were multiple figures coming into view. “Now!”

“Confundo, Stupefy!” Harry whispered, jabbing the wand at Fleur. Tossing aside Fleur’s wand as her eyes rolled back and she crumpled, he turned and ran.

“Somebody’s down there, get him!” a hoarse goblin voice shouted. Swallowing hard and taking a firmer hold on his Invisibility Cloak, Harry hurtled out of the aisle, and turned towards the door along the side of the wall.

He hit it with his shoulder, and much to Harry’s shock, the door flew open, revealing a narrow stone stairwell. Keeping a firm hand on his wand, he wrenched his hand into his pocket and pulled out the mirror.

“Nymphadora, you better get moving fast, because I got what I came for!”

* * *

“So you’re saying,” a orange-haired man said slowly as he crossed his arms over his chest and looked down on a haggard man scribbling quickly on a fresh piece of parchment, “that there was under-age magic used in Gringotts? Magic used by a wand?”

“That’s what all of our magical detection devices indicate,” the haggard man replied, pointing back at the whirring devices behind his desk. “The Trace went off just a few minutes ago, and nobody has a damned clue how it happened.”

“And you still can’t detect who cast the magic?” the orange-haired man asked with frustration.

“The spell doesn’t allow for it.”

“The spell is flawed and needs to be replaced,” the orange-haired man growled, slamming his hands on the desk. “No young witch or wizard would cast magic so openly in Gringotts unless they have everything to lose. And that means that it can only be one person.”

He turned to the two somberly-dressed wizards standing behind him. “The Aurors have a security breach. Get the Hit Wizards together – we’ll need a full complement if we want to storm Gringotts.”

“Are you sure that’s wise, Dmitri?” one of the wizards asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Potter’s not getting away from me,” Dmitri Kemester growled. “Not this time.”

* * *

Tonks drew her wand as she passed through the doors of Gringotts. The two goblin doormen gave her hateful, jealous looks, but she

didn't care. Harry was on his way, and from the sounds of the message, he was in trouble.

Moving towards the fourth counter and standing behind a heavy-set witch in maroon robes, she tapped her foot impatiently. Harry should be coming any second now...

There was a loud bang, and several of the goblins looked around in surprise. Tonks fingered her wand carefully – timing would be critical, and she knew it. Harry must have thrown his firework to throw off pursuit, and that means – there!

Despite the complete seriousness of the situation, she could only smile at the utter ludicrousness of the scene. A pair of feet (undoubtedly belonging to Harry under his Cloak) were running wildly across the main hall of Gringotts, hotly pursued by at least ten goblins and as many wizards, all brandishing wands (or in the case of the goblins, rather sharp knives).

Tonks raised her eyebrows as she silently made a quick flick of her wand and concentrated hard on one of her favourite non-verbal spells. Glisseo!

A second later, the goblins and wizards behind Harry began to stumble and collapse, unable to gain any traction on the slick marble floor – now slicker than ice. Pandemonium erupted through the hall, as a dozen armed goblin guards came flooding in through side doors –

Tonks quickened her pace and with a few easy steps, she had approached the doors of Gringotts. She could hear the frantic hammering of shoes, and she knew Harry was close behind her.

But there was a resounding number of pops, and to Tonks' shock, a dozen dark-robed figures appeared out of nowhere in Diagon Alley. Hit Wizards, she thought with a pang. Harry must have cast magic...

She raised her voice. "Now!"

There was a few seconds of silence before Tonks was nearly knocked off her feet by the multicoloured blast. From a nearby upper window, somebody (and Tonks knew exactly who) had thrown two massive crates of fireworks onto the cobblestones. All across the stones, fireworks were exploding and ricocheting, sending sparks and fire everywhere –

She felt somebody slam into her from behind, and she heard Harry's voice in her ear. "Let's go!"

She nodded quickly, and grabbing Harry's arm (which had shot out of his Invisibility Cloak to hang suspended in the air), she spun on her heel and Disapparated a second before the last of Fred and George's fireworks rocked Diagon Alley.

Author's Notes: well, I'm sorry about the long wait - I lost the majority of this chapter when my hard drive died on me, and I did a lot of major edits on it once the data was recovered. That being said, the next phase in Harry's plan comes into play here, with a few new variables to consider... As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“Damn it, I bloody hate Apparition!” Harry swore as he stumbled against the doorsteps, coming out of the Side-Along Apparition off-balance and breathing hard. “Why the hell can’t we just use brooms –”

“Because that way is faster and it’s a lot harder to track,” Tonks grunted, regaining her own balance from the hasty Apparition. “We’re just lucky we didn’t splinch ourselves, especially at the speed you were running! Now let’s get inside before we’re seen...”

Tapping the door twice, Tonks shoved it open and pulled Harry inside as she screwed up her face. A few seconds later, the regular short, pink-haired Tonks was pulling Harry down towards the stairs.

“Harry!” Sirius exclaimed, bolting up from his seat at the kitchen and pulling his godson into a tight embrace. “By Merlin, you’re safe!”

Harry let out a heavy sigh of relief. “At safe as anywhere, I guess,” he replied heavily. “But it wasn’t clean, Sirius.”

Sirius froze, and Lupin, who had just been getting to his feet, stopped in mid-step, the expression on his face a mixture of disapproval, relief, and fear.

“We weren’t tracked, Remus, but it was close,” Tonks said, shaking out her hair as she slumped into a chair at the table. “There must have been two score of them chasing Harry at the end when we were getting out of –”

“Tonks,” Harry said warningly, letting go of Sirius.

“- Of where we were,” Tonks finished lamely, flushing at how close she had come to giving away Harry’s secret.

“You weren’t identified?” Sirius asked tensely. “Nobody saw your face?”

Harry snorted. “No, I was seen – hell, it was probably the reason why I got chased out in the first place. I didn’t have a choice, Sirius –”

Sirius quickly gave Harry a warning glance before turning to Lupin. “Moony, do you mind giving us a few minutes?” he asked.

Lupin’s eyes went wide with shock. “I can’t even listen to what Harry has to say, now? Padfoot, what is going on?”

“It’s better that you don’t know, Professor,” Harry said slowly, not meeting Lupin’s eyes.

“If you’re in trouble, I want to help you –”

Harry shook his head, a look of disappointment flitting across his face. “There’s nothing you can do, Professor. It’d be better for you if you don’t know.”

“Harry, please –”

“The less people who know, the better,” Sirius said softly. “Remus, I don’t want to cut you out, but trust me when I say this: you can’t help us now.” He gestured towards the door. “Please, Remus.”

Lupin’s face drained of colour. “Harry, what can I do –”

“You can leave the room and shut the door,” Harry snapped, getting to his feet and giving his former professor an icy stare. “Then you can go upstairs to Ron and Hermione, tell them to forget the Extendable Ears, and that I’ll be up to talk to them after Sirius, Tonks, and I are finished here. That’d be a good start.”

Swallowing hard, Lupin turned and slowly walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. When Harry couldn’t hear Lupin’s

footsteps anymore, Tonks drew her wand and started muttering as she pointed it at the door.

“Harry, that was cold,” Sirius finally said.

“You think I like this?” Harry shot back. “Sirius, I don’t have room for error! If I can’t trust him, that he won’t go to Dumbledore or Shacklebolt, he doesn’t get to know anything. It’s that simple –”

“I had to sit with him all morning and reassure him – and myself, come to think of it – that you weren’t going to get yourself killed, Harry,” Sirius interrupted evenly, pulling a few bottles of Butterbeer out of the cabinet and sliding onto the table. “He wants to help you – how do you think you made him feel when you told him that he couldn’t even know where you were going? James was his best friend, for Merlin’s sake, do you think he would have liked you treating Remus like that? Do you think I liked treating Remus like that?”

“You know what we’re dealing with here, Sirius,” Harry growled, his own patience running out, “and that the slightest error or leak will put me in Azkaban or have me dead. I don’t want to have to do this to Lupin, but I don’t have a bloody choice! Until I can trust him, he can’t know what I’m doing.”

“But you’re going to tell Ron and Hermione.”

“Not the whole truth,” Harry replied, disgust in his voice as he dropped his bag on the table with an audible thud and pulled it open. “But enough that they have an idea what’s going on. The Prophet’s eventually going to catch wind of this mess, and they should know enough of the truth so they don’t think I’m some sort of twisted freak by the time this is over.”

Tonks and Sirius exchanged looks, but Harry was already pulling the files out of his bag and laying them out on the table, shoving cutlery and goblets out of the way as he flipped them open.

“You got the files, then?” Sirius asked, a trace of a grin crossing onto his face.

“Fleur helped me get ‘em,” Harry muttered, as he flipped open the folder not marked with the Gringotts seal. To his satisfaction, the disordered heap of financial documents were matched by a stack of torn newspaper cuttings, all from the Daily Prophet dated over fifteen years earlier.

“She helped you?”

“As much as she could,” Harry replied. “Don’t worry, she didn’t leak me out – that was Welmon.”

“Did you try coercing or bribing him?” Sirius asked, picking up one of the papers and scanning it carefully. “So Keaton Matthis was the one who did the Rosier files...”

“Yep, he did,” Harry replied, his eyes scanning the first clipping in the pile. It was a short, brusque obituary written by Aurors for Evan Rosier. There was no picture, but Harry was glad for that – he didn’t want to see the man’s face. If he’s as sick and twisted as Sirius described him, I’m glad I’m not looking at him. “And as for Welmon, he didn’t seem the type to be bribed easily, so I had to intimidate him. Hell, probably the reason why I got as much time as I did because I scared him so badly.”

“Why do you have two files?”

Harry looked up and gave Sirius a steely look. “Because that one has to deal with the closing of the Potter accounts. Know anything about that, Sirius?”

Sirius went pale. “Harry, I was in Azkaban, how could I possibly –”

“That’s bullshit, Sirius, you know something.”

“I don’t know the details, Harry, it happened six months after I went to Azkaban,” Sirius replied, looking stricken as he turned to Tonks. “Find anything in those papers?”

“Nothing except that the Aurors were involved a lot more in this dirty money than they’ll ever want to admit,” Tonks replied, wrinkling her nose with disgust. “Makes me disappointed to even be an Auror.”

“Scrimgeour’s name on anything yet?” Harry asked tensely, flipping through the clippings.

“Nothing yet... aha!” Tonks slid the page across the table, and Harry and Sirius bent to read it.

“It’s a financial record,” Harry murmured, “or at least it looks like one...”

“It shows transactions to an Auror department account registered to one Rufus Scrimgeour, but there’s a bunch of numbers where the ledger details are supposed to be!” Sirius muttered. “How on earth are we supposed to recognize which is Rosier’s?”

“Probably because it’s cross-referenced with this,” Harry replied triumphantly, pulling an official-looking letter from the stack of papers and laying it out of the table next to the record. “See the number on top? That number matches that number there, and from the looks of this letter, it says that the assets and gold from one Evan Rosier under the conditions of his will are to be transferred to the Ministry vault 669, corresponding to –”

“Rufus Scrimgeour, according to this,” Tonks finished, a smile spreading across her face. “Damn, that’s a lot of Galleons being moved!”

“I think you might be enjoying this a bit too much, Tonks,” Sirius said wryly. “You might be Moody’s protégé, but he’s still your boss.”

“And sometimes he can be a right ass,” Tonks shot back. “I’ve got a right to feel a bit of schadenfreude about this.”

“Then I have what I need,” Harry said, breathing a heavy sigh of relief. “Toss me a sheet of parchment and a quill –”

“We’ve got to be more careful than that,” Tonks cut him off, pulling up her own bag and quickly rummaging around inside of it. After a few seconds, she pulled an acid-green quill out and tossed it onto the slightly crumpled paper had pulled from a stack on the counter. “Most Aurors know spells that can trace handwritten notes, and the last thing you want is Scrimgeour tracking you just because your finger touched the ink on the parchment.”

Harry eyed the Quick-Quotes Quill with disgust. “And how will using that thing help me? It’ll twist my words –”

“Maybe a bit, but the tougher the letter sounds to Scrimgeour, the better,” Tonks replied bracingly, crossing her arms over her chest. “He’s not an easy man to intimidate. Plus, you can’t track letters written with one of these things. After all, why do you think Rita Skeeter was so successful with her work?”

“A bit too successful for my taste,” Harry muttered, but he eyed the paper speculatively.

“Do you know what you’re going to say?”

Harry let out a brief, harsh laugh. “Sirius, for once, this’ll be the easy part.”

* * *

“You’ve got a report?” Dmitri Kemester growled.

“Goblins won’t let us in,” Reed Larshall, a snub-nosed, heavy-jawed man who was one of Kemester’s best subordinates, said roughly. “They want to keep the situation internal, and they’re currently working on interrogating the witnesses.”

“They were doing that a half hour ago,” Kemester said with exasperation. “Has there been progress?”

“They’re sealing the bank tight,” Larshall grunted, running a hand through the short, bristly hair that covered his scalp, “but they did say if ‘the Ministry manages to procure a binding warrant, they might let us inside to watch.’ Bloody shit-eating goblin wretches –”

“Though we both know it’s true, saying it won’t get us anywhere,” Kemester said in a low warning voice, “especially if the goblins are watching us, and I know they are. Any sign of who set off the damned fireworks?”

“No reports yet, but Barkley said the damage is nothing like he’s seen before, and he used to be in Experimental Charms. Not strong enough to be a serious explosive, but still making quite a noisy flashy bang when they’re dropped.”

“Any idea how they were set off?”

“Evidence points to a few crates dropped from upper story windows of some of the shops, while the rest were rigged to blow when the others were set off. It looks like a pretty crude job, but it’s not like it needed to be well-timed or anything – it just needed the dropped fireworks to set off the rigged ones.”

“They did their job, Reed,” Kemester said heavily, “and Potter got away from us again. Heard from Bones yet?”

“She’s in meetings with Scrimgeour this morning, but the other Hit Wizards at the office are wondering what the hell is going on here. And the Aurors know something’s up,” Larshall added in a low voice. “And you know better than anyone the Prophet’ll be here soon.”

Kemester rubbed his jaw in contemplation for a few seconds before slamming a fist into his palm. “Okay, here’s what we’ll do. Call the office and tell them to send another two squads down here. We need this area cordoned off as a crime scene and somebody to keep the Prophet well away from this until we can show them something that’ll get them on our side. Get somebody from Experimental Charms down here so maybe they can examine some of that firework debris

and find a maker. Then,” Kemester took a deep breath, “send an emergency message to the Minister.”

Larshall went pale. “You sure that’s the best option, Dmitri? I mean, we don’t have anything yet –”

“If I know Cornelius Fudge, he’ll want to make a publicity statement regarding this,” Kemester said, his teeth on edge as he threw another scathing glare at Gringotts, “and maybe if we’re lucky he’ll have the political clout for us to get in Gringotts and get some solid information. Follow me so far?”

“Cordon the area with two new squads, Experimental Charms, call the Minister... anything else?”

“One last thing,” Kemester said, lowering his voice and leaning close to Larshall. “I want you to go back to the Ministry and get a small squad of your own for a quick operation. I want you to go to Kingsley Shacklebolt’s residence – look it up the Auror registry if you have to – and check to see if Potter’s there.”

“You think –”

“I don’t want to be fucked over on the details,” Kemester said quickly, his eyes aflame, “by something I’ve overlooked. If Potter’s not there, search the premise completely and get the hell out before Shacklebolt’s alarms go crazy. If he is there, get him into Ministry custody and his wand out of his hands. If he tries to run... you have permission to do what it takes to take him down. Try and take him in one piece, but if you can’t...”

“And if Shacklebolt’s already back at his residence?” Larshall asked worriedly. “I mean, blimey, Dmitri, if he’s there, think of what the Prophet’ll say about this... Hit Wizards investigating Aurors...”

Kemester set his jaw. “Well, I guess you’ll have to be really careful, then, won’t you, Reed?”

Larshall swallowed hard. “Okay, Dmitri, but what if –”

“Sir, we’ve got a witness!”

“Larshall, go,” Kemester said tensely, “I’ve got to deal with this.” He turned quickly to the approaching Hit Wizard, a brawny fellow with sloping eyebrows that Kemester knew as Dwight. Damn Bones for sending these green Hit Wizards out into the field, but I needed a team quick, and it’s not like I had much of a choice...

But to Kemester’s surprise, Dwight was accompanied by someone – a man with thinning hair and gold-rimmed spectacles, wearing a brown Muggle suit. The man looked anxious, and Kemester was immediately wary. Dwight may be green, but he knows better than to let any old wizard come up to me... this better be good.

“Sir, this is Vesparian Welmon, a Gringotts accountant,” Dwight said, giving his superior a sharp nod. “He claims that... well, he had an encounter with the ‘intruder’ that broke into Gringotts.”

“Claims that,” Kemester said suspiciously. “Any proof?”

“I want protection,” Welmon said, swallowing hard. “And I want complete confidentiality – nothing to implicate me or the bank. I was the one who tipped off the goblins that he was Gringotts anyways – albeit not as quickly as they would have liked.”

“How did you get out of there so quickly?” Kemester pursued, his eyebrows narrowing as he motioned for Welmon to sit down at the paper-covered table that he had ‘borrowed’ from Fortescue’s ice-cream parlour for a few Sickles. “The little bastards haven’t been letting anybody out –”

“I know the right people, and they know better not to cross me,” Welmon replied stiffly. “I’ve worked at that bank for years, and that’s earned me a certain amount of respect.”

Arrogant berk, Kemester thought as he sat down across the accountant. He thinks I give a damn...

“And there is a back exit for those with enough seniority,” Welmon finished with a sniff.

“Pity Potter didn’t know about that, it would have made his escape all the easier,” Kemester said idly, examining his fingernails.

Welmon went white. “How did you –”

“Don’t play games with me, accountant, I know who broke into Gringotts,” Kemester growled, leaning across the table. He kept his grim expression, despite his smug triumph. I was right – Potter broke in after all. But what did he want? “So why was he in there?”

“He wanted information,” Welmon said instantly. “But... well, from what I’ve heard, I don’t understand why he was after it –”

“Leave the reasoning for someone who knows how to do it,” Kemester cut him off forcefully. “Tell me what Potter wanted.”

“Information about an old accountant named Matthis, who died nearly a decade ago,” Welmon said in a low voice. “He was looking for the accountant who closed the Rosier accounts, and Matthis was the one who did that. H-he wasn’t even looking for the information on the Potter vaults, which was what I thought he might have been after –”

“That was before Potter was even born!” Kemester snarled, cutting off Welmon’s babbling. “Why does he even care?”

“I don’t know why he even came to me!” Welmon replied angrily. “There are dozens of other accountants he could have talked to...”

“Have you had any relationship with Potter in the past?” Kemester asked, yanking a free scrap of parchment out and scribbling new information. If this can help me understand and track Potter...

“The closest relative to Potter that I ever worked with was Sirius Black, and it’s not like he would have told Potter anything –”

Kemester froze. “Black, you say? Escaped mass-murderer, Sirius Black? The one who confronted Potter just over a year ago?”

Welmon’s eyes were wide. “Potter met Black and survived?”

“It wasn’t well circulated, but Magical Law Enforcement found out from Fudge himself,” Kemester muttered, his mind churning. Shacklebolt’s in charge of Black’s investigation – and he’s also the one who caught Potter. Is there some sort of connection that I’m missing here?

He looked up to hear several loud cracks as two dozen more Hit Wizards and Magical Law Enforcement officials Apparated into Diagon Alley, all with wands drawn. The commander, a scarred fellow named Leon Sanders – and Kemester’s immediate subordinate – quickly spotted Kemester and strode over, his eyes flashing.

“You’ve got quite a mess on your hands, Dmitri,” Sanders said bluntly, his eyes flashing as they looked over the piles of papers strewn over Kemester’s table. “You need a hand?”

“I’ll need more than one,” Kemester muttered, getting to his feet. “I need your help.”

“Obviously.”

“There’s a suspected leak in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and I want it plugged before Bones and Scrimgeour get involved,” Kemester said briskly. “I want you to get back to the Ministry with two of your best and take Shacklebolt in for questioning. Don’t bother getting Scrimgeour’s permission; we’ll deal with the political mess later.”

“And if he asks why?” Sanders asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Say that it’s part of an investigation,” Kemester replied, lowering his voice. “Best case scenario is that he’s just unaware and

incompetent.” His eyes glinted with cool triumph as they met the business-like gaze of his best combat specialist.

“Worst case he’s a spy and a traitor.”

* * *

“So, how does it look?” Harry asked as Tonks finally whisked away the Quick-Quotes Quill back into her bag.

Sirius whistled slowly as he read the letter. “He won’t like it, that’s for damned sure.”

“The devil’s in the details, though,” Tonks noted, rubbing her chin appreciatively before taking a quick swig of Butterbeer. “Your offer’s simple enough, but the little comments are what makes this thing dangerous, and most of them only Scrimgeour will be able to understand.”

“Which is what I want,” Harry finished coolly.

Tonks suddenly frowned, worry crossing her face. “You know, Harry, there’s a big possibility that Scrimgeour could enter this as evidence in your trial... and it could be damaging evidence too. That you tried to bribe and blackmail the Head of the Auror Department...”

“Scrimgeour’s too savvy for that,” Sirius replied, finishing off his Butterbeer with a long drink. “And if he ever released that letter, the Prophet would find out, and the implications alone would be the death of his political career. You’ve got a work of art there, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “Maybe.” He got up slowly and shoved the folders back into his bag. “I’m going to go talk to Ron and Hermione and start preparing for that court case... odds is the implications won’t be enough on their own to get me out of the trial. Can Hedwig deliver this?”

“That’s a very bad idea,” Tonks said sharply, carefully picking up the letter with two fingers, careful not to touch any of the ink. “Owls can

be tracked, and you don't want them finding us here. I'm not sure how owls work with the Fidelius Charm, anyways -"

"Thanks, Tonks," Harry said with a smile of relief as he headed towards the door. He carefully turned the doorknob -

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Mr. Potter and his merry band of miscreants," Severus Snape spat with disgust, as he moved from his position against the wall.

"Snape," Sirius growled, "you'd better have a damn good reason for being in my house right now, because I've had a very trying morning."

"Doubtless, with the extreme amount of work that you've had to do," Snape replied with a sneer. "So Potter, no longer good enough for Weasley and Granger, or even the werewolf? Taking up arms with an entire different breed of felon - an escaped convict and a traitorous Auror. And to think that you were supposed to be the hero."

Harry clenched his fist, his urge to throttle Snape burning in his gut, but he knew that slugging the Potions Master would only make things worse. "I need to work with people I can trust," he growled, "and you're not one of them."

"Indubitably," Snape said, his lip curling with disgust.

"How long were you listening at the door, Snivellus?" Sirius snarled, his eyes blazing with fury as his hand slid towards his wand - a motion being slowly mimicked by Tonks, and one that Snape noted instantly. Not good odds for the bastard, Harry noted with savage triumph.

"Even despite the fact that your charms were lamentable and easily broken, I do not listen at doors like a coward -"

Bullshit, Harry thought, remembering with a surge of rage that Snape's eavesdropping had resulted in the deaths of his parents.

“-And the only reason I am here is because I was contacted by your pet werewolf, Black,” Snape finished with a sneer. “Apparently, he was rather distraught to discover that Potter no longer trusted him, and he felt that someone in the ‘Order needed to be notified to protect Mr. Potter before he does something rash’. Unfortunately, given that most members of the Order were either occupied with their jobs or with missions, I received the utterly detestable role of investigating Potter’s latest advent of rashness and stupidity.”

“Does Dumbledore –”

“The Headmaster has been in meetings with the Ministry all day, Miss Tonks,” Snape replied coolly, “so he likely does not know of this development.”

Thank Merlin for that, Harry thought, still glaring daggers at Snape. At least I still have some time... and I guess I was right about Lupin, too. And I really wanted to trust him...

“Well, Potter?”

Harry looked up and met Snape’s cold black eyes. “My business,” he began, “is not your concern, Professor. And Tonks is no traitor.”

“I was in Diagon Alley less than an hour ago, Potter, and there were cordons surrounding Gringotts, manned by armed Hit Wizards. When I returned home, a Patronus from Remus Lupin was waiting for me, saying that you had done something. I can connect the dots, Potter – and so can Hit Wizards like Kemester. Your idiocy and rashness is going to put you in Azkaban, and –”

“It’s not your business if I did anything around Gringotts,” Harry growled, taking a step towards the stairs. “Now if you’d excuse me –”

The next two seconds were a blur. Snape’s hand darted towards his wand, and with a white flash, Harry saw a furious Snape sprawled at the base of the stairs, his black robes tangled. Sirius’ wand was out.

“I’m going to say this once,” Sirius growled. “Snivellus, keep your hands off Harry, and get the fuck out of my house!”

Snape’s eyes were blazing with raw fury as he slowly got to his feet. “Black, your idiocy astounds me.”

“As does yours,” Sirius shot back, taking another step forward. “I don’t care if you’re Dumbledore’s precious spy or not, I’m still of the opinion you should have died nineteen years ago by the Whomping Willow. Now get out my house before I decide to... revisit the past.”

“Dumbledore will hear about this!”

Sirius let out a bark-like laugh. “And he’s not the one who’s prophesied to kill Voldemort – Harry is!”

“But of course, Professor, you already knew that, didn’t you?” Harry said, his tone conversational as he leaned against the wall, his gaze fixed on the Potions Professor.

Snape’s face went deathly pale. Without another word, the wizard spun on his heel and vanished with a pop, leaving Harry’s disgusted glare.

“Harry...” Tonks finally began, her eyes darting nervously back and forth between him and Sirius, “that probably wasn’t the best of –”

“We don’t need him,” Sirius said shortly, sliding his wand back into his pocket, not meeting the Auror’s eyes. “We don’t need traitors.”

“You’ll talk to Lupin, won’t you?” Harry asked quietly.

“Tonks and I will handle that,” Sirius replied grimly. “Merlin only knows why he contacted Snape of all people.”

“He was worried, probably scared –”

“Scared, my arse!” Sirius scowled. “The Moony I knew would stand up for his friends, even when times were tough, not go to Snivellus. The Moony I knew had some bloody backbone. Don’t worry, we’ll talk to him. You go find Ron and Hermione... try and see if you can avoid another disaster there.”

Harry nodded heavily as he slowly climbed the stairs with Sirius and Tonks, his heart pounding in his chest as he slowly pulled open the door on the landing to the room where Ron and Hermione were talking.

“You don’t have to hide it, you two, I know you were talking about me,” Harry replied tiredly, his voice tinged with disgust as he closed the door quietly and sat down on the sagging bed.

“You – you’re back!” Ron gasped as he jumped to his feet. “Lupin said you were going to do something crazy –”

“I’ve already had my craziness today,” Harry replied bitterly, “and I’ve already heard about it from Snape. You two wouldn’t have had anything to do with that, would you?”

Ron snorted. “Are you kidding me? Did Lupin honestly think that would work, calling Snape here?”

“We just suggested somebody in the Order come,” Hermione quickly answered. “To make sure you d-didn’t do anything dangerous –”

“Bit late for that, it’s already been done,” Harry spat, tossing his bag on the bed. “There and back again.”

“Where were you this morning, mate?” Ron asked with confusion. “I mean, I woke up this morning and Sirius only told me that you were busy with something. Why didn’t you tell us you were leaving?”

Harry eyed Ron’s open, honest face with thoughtfulness as he wondered if his best friend was trustworthy. He wouldn’t tell

Dumbledore... at least I hope he wouldn't... but I trust him more than I trust Hermione, strange as that feels...

"I didn't want you following, or trying to help," he finally lied, meeting Ron's expression. "None of us can use magic over the holidays, and it was dangerous enough for just me."

"But where did you go?"

"I can't tell you that. The less people who know, the better."

"Harry, we're your friends," Hermione said with concern. "We'd want to help you –"

"Not with this, you wouldn't," Harry cut her off coolly.

"But I can see your Invisibility Cloak in your bag... and what are those file folders from –"

Harry snatched his bag away from the bed. "I can't tell you."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Harry, this is serious. Did... did you break into something? I mean, t-that knife Sirius gave you is bulging in your pocket next to your wand –"

"Why are you looking at that region of my pants?" Harry asked with exasperation.

Ron chuckled under his breath while Hermione went red with indignation. She tossed her hair back and struggled to regain control.

"But why would you try and break in anywhere? It doesn't make..."

Her voice trailed off, and Harry knew that she had begun to connect the dots, just like Snape.

"Hermione, as much as I want to, I can't tell you – this is for your own safety here."

“You’ve got files in your bag, your Invisibility Cloak, and Sirius’ knife,” Hermione said softly. “And y-you won’t even tell your own friends where you were going, and that means you were breaking into a really dangerous place.”

“Hermione...”

“And there’s only two dangerous places like that in Britain, and one of them is the Ministry, and you wouldn’t go there, they’re hunting you —”

“Hermione!”

“And that only leaves... Gringotts,” Hermione finished, her eyes wide with astonishment. “How, Harry? How did you get out alive, breaking into one of those vaults?”

“I didn’t... look, Hermione, this is exactly why I couldn’t tell you anything!” Harry said with frustration.

But a light was already dawning on Hermione’s face – a light streaked with disapproval, disappointment, and anger.

“You wouldn’t have gone to Gringotts without a good reason, Harry Potter. Where did you get those files?”

“An ally gave them to me,” Harry snapped. “I need them for my case!”

“You don’t have any allies in Gringotts except...” Hermione’s voice trailed off again. “Oh, of course! You got Fleur, didn’t you?”

“Fleur?” Ron perked up. “As in, Fleur Delacour? How is she?”

“She’s stuck in a dead-end job that she hates, and I likely Confunded her badly enough that she won’t be able to string together the details of where or who I was,” Harry replied, his temper finally rising back to the surface.

“You stole files from Gringotts!” Hermione exclaimed, anger and disappointment warring in her voice. “Harry, how could you? Those are personal financial records!”

Harry didn’t speak – there were a thousand arguments and lies warring in his head for precedence, but he knew none of them would convince Hermione of the rightness of his actions. So he said nothing, and only fixed her with an empty, expectant stare.

Hermione swallowed hard, her voice only growing more angry with every second. “And there’s only one reason you would have stolen financial records... you’re planning on blackmailing someone, aren’t you?”

“Hermione, Harry wouldn’t do that!” Ron exclaimed, shocked. “And why would he even –”

BANG.

“Harry, we need to talk – now,” Sirius said, his eyes burning with something akin to panic.

“Sirius, we can’t –”

“Sirius, did Harry break into Gringotts today?” Hermione interrupted.

“Hermione, it’s not the time to –”

“He did, didn’t he?” Hermione gasped, her eyes slightly reddening as she blinked back tears. “Harry, Sirius... how could –”

“Do you want to see me go to Azkaban for the rest of my life?” Harry asked furiously, his patience finally giving away at her last exclamation. “Do you want that for me, Hermione?”

“But if you’re going to break the law like this –”

“And you wonder why I can’t trust you,” Harry spat. “You’ll tell Dumbledore everything I’m doing!”

“Harry, how can you say –”

“I know you better than you think, Hermione,” Harry replied grimly.

“He’s only trying to help you!”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, on his terms, while I’m the one bleeding.”

“Harry, that’s not –”

“Not fair, Sirius?” Harry snarled, rounding on his godfather. “You’re damn right it’s not fair! It’s also not fair that you and I are wanted for murder and that there’s a prophecy stating that I’ve got no choice but to kill Voldemort before he kills me, but I can’t do much about that, can I?” He turned back to Hermione and shook his head. “Life’s not fair, and sometimes... well, sometimes that means you have to be unfair too.”

He turned back to Sirius. “Let’s go outside.”

“No need, if they already know,” Sirius said grimly. “And we might want to start packing, too. They’ve arrested Kingsley.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“Because according to Moody, they threw charges of gross incompetence and high treason at him, or at least that’s what the word is coming from the Magical Law Enforcement Office. The Hit Wizards took him over lunch break.”

“But why would we pack?” Ron asked, rubbing his scalp in confusion. “And why would they charge Kingsley with high treason?”

“Because Kemester likely figured out that his investigation of my whereabouts was fake,” Sirius said, his hands clenching and

unclenching nervously. “And if they’ve got him on high treason, they’ve got permission to use Veritaserum without a warrant –”

“And the first question Kemester will ask is where I am,” Harry finished, his guts beginning to freeze with fear. “But the Fidelius Charm –”

“You’re not part of the Order, Harry,” Hermione cut him off softly. “The charm only protects the location of the Order – not you. They’ll be coming.”

“Too late,” Ron said, going pale as he peered out the window. “They’re already here.”

Author's Note: well, midterms are nearly over, and my philosophy paper is completed, so that means I now have a new chapter of this story finished! Hope you all enjoy the new twists in this story - and yes, the Fidelius issue will be resolved in this chapter. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“I’m telling you, Dmitri, this isn’t a good idea –”

“Larshall, for the last damned time, when I care for your opinion, I’ll ask for it!” Dmitri Kemester snarled, running a hand through his hair in frustration as his detection spell failed yet again. “Hells and damnations, this isn’t working!”

“Maybe Shacklebolt knows more –”

“If he does, he’s not talking about it,” Kemester interrupted grimly, eyeing the street with frustration. “He’s not the Secret-Keeper of where they’re hiding Potter, if that Veritaserum was working properly.”

“You got lucky even getting this far,” Sanders drawled lazily, leaning against the fence.

“Sanders, I’m not in the mood for this right now,” Kemester snapped.

“I mean, you got lucky bringing Shacklebolt in with that soot on his fingers that just so happened to be the remnants of a note with this street name on it, but to expect anything more –”

“Sanders, do the world a favour and start casting detection spells, or if that proves too taxing for you, go find us a ranking member of the Wizengamot so we can get a damned warrant once we find this place,” Kemester snarled. “In fact, go do that instead - you’re annoying me just standing here.”

Sanders let out a long-suffering yawn. “I’m tired, Kemester, can’t you just send –”

“No. I’m sending you because you have a working brain on your shoulders, unlike most of these other imbeciles that Bones assigned me,” Kemester replied angrily. “Get back to the Ministry and hurry – I want this to be as legitimate as possible, and I need a good warrant if I want to force entry into this place.”

Sanders snorted. “Yeah, because hauling Shacklebolt in on charges of treason so you could use Veritaserum without his lawyer present is completely legitimate.”

Kemester’s eyes narrowed dangerously as he glared at his subordinate, who only winked before Disapparating. Shaking his head with disgust, Kemester raised his wand and kept muttering.

“It’s a good thing this street is deserted, with you bringing that thing out,” Larshall said nervously.

“Yeah, but considering we have enough Muggle-Repelling Charms all over this street, there isn’t much of a security risk,” Kemester replied shortly. “For once we won’t have to call the Obliviators to sort this out.”

“It was risky to use the truth potion on Shacklebolt, though,” Larshall said in a low voice. “I mean, Scrimgeour’s going to be furious –”

“Not as much, considering he thinks Shacklebolt’s making a power play for his office.”

“Bones isn’t going to be happy with us either, you know,” Larshall said worriedly. “I mean, she could block the warrant to Gringotts or to this place. And she’s rumored to be sympathetic to Dumbledore... and that might mean she has sympathies for Potter.”

Kemester rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and I’m a goblin’s prostitute. Have you gotten any of that analysis from Experimental Charms yet?”

“No identification on the explosives yet, but they cross-referenced every known brand of explosive that has been registered for

commercial or Ministry usage and the residue doesn't really match any of them. They're thinking that it could be new."

Kemester swore under his breath as his detection charm fizzled again. "So Potter's got new explosives. Wonderful. Anything from Gringotts yet?"

Larshall shook his head. "They aren't letting us in, obviously."

"Damnation! All right, what about from the Ministry? Did you get a message through to the Minister?"

"I tried, Dmitri, but he's been in meetings with high-ups in the Ministry all day, and Dumbledore's been there too, and I assumed you didn't want me tipping off the Headmaster that the law is after his favourite student –"

"You made the right choice, Reed, don't worry," Kemester replied distractedly, as he considered which detection spell to use next. "And the more Dumbledore doesn't know about this, the better. Any word from the office?"

"The Aurors are up in arms that you hauled Kingsley Shacklebolt in," Larshall said, his voice a mixture of awe and astonishment. "I still can't believe you arrested him when you went back for lunch – that took a lot of nerve."

"Why else would I have gone back to the Ministry for lunch otherwise?" Kemester replied testily, surveying the buildings carefully as he raised his wand again, considering his next spell. "And I don't care that I made a scene."

"Some of the other Hit Wizards aren't too thrilled, though. And Charon was ruddy furious."

"Charon never liked the way I operated, and he's due to retire in a few months, so I don't care too much about him. Anything significant from the Aurors?"

“Only that you were lucky as hell that Moody wasn’t there at the time and only heard about it after you got out here,” Larshall replied with a whistle. “Merlin, he was furious.”

“But he won’t go to Scrimgeour,” Kemester replied as he began to twirl his wand. “He’s only at the Ministry as an advisor, and Scrimgeour won’t listen to him anyway, so he’s not a threat.”

“Most of the Aurors don’t know yet, and some of the others think you brought him in for questioning in tracking Potter, not in direct connection to his case.” Larshall shuffled nervously as Kemester began his next detection spell – only to watch it fail completely in a gush of pinkish smoke. After Kemester had finished swearing, he cleared his throat for his last bombshell. “And you know, the Prophet wants to talk to you.”

Kemester snorted. “Fat chance of that happening.”

“They want an interview.”

“Well, they aren’t getting one.”

“But Dmitri –”

“It’ll do me more harm than good in the long run, and I don’t have the patience to sit across the table with Rita Skeeter for a few hours until she gets my point,” Kemester growled.

“But I heard she wasn’t working for the Prophet anymore –”

“Then it’ll be some other deadbeat I don’t care for, so the answer is still no,” Kemester finished, spotting Sanders reappearing in the street, looking distinctly out of breath. “Why are you back so soon? Did you get the warrant?”

Sanders shook his head. “I caught Amelia Bones when she was coming out of a meeting with Scrimgeour, and she wouldn’t give me the warrant without more proof–”

“Big surprise!” Kemester shouted, his patience nearly snapping with exasperation. “I told you to go the Wizengamot, not to her!”

“She’s a member of the court, she could give me a warrant as well as anyone,” Sanders shot back heatedly, “and with her Hit Wizard connections, I thought I’d have a decent chance!”

“So get back to the Ministry and get me a warrant!” Kemester snarled. “Or better yet, I’ll go talk to Bones – maybe she’ll listen to someone who hasn’t traded their brain in for Chocolate Frogs and shiny objects –”

“There’s no point in leaving, Dmitri,” Sanders replied with a heavy sigh. “Bones is getting a squad together and she’s on her way. And Larshall?”

“Yeah?”

“Your message to the Minister –”

“My message to the Minister,” Kemester interrupted tensely.

“Whatever,” Sanders snapped with exasperation. “Well, it got through, and he’s coming too.”

Kemester’s mouth fell open. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope,” Sanders replied with a smirk growing across his face. “Fudge wants to take a personal interest in this investigation, Kemester, and he – and the Prophet – is on his way. All eyes are on you now, Dmitri – you’d better not let us all down.”

* * *

“So what do you think are the odds that Tonks got that message through?” Harry asked Sirius as they paced around the drawing room – a room that Sirius had firmly locked and warded against any entry besides that of himself, Harry, and Tonks. And just as well, Harry

thought savagely. After what happened with Lupin, Hermione, and Snape, it's better not to take chances...

"She definitely delivered the letter," Sirius replied bracingly. "The question will be when Scrimgeour actually reads it. There's going to be a huge political mess now that Kingsley got hauled in on charges of treason, and Scrimgeour's going to be under a lot of pressure from his own department as it is to bail one of his best Aurors out. Trust me, it won't be taken well that he got arrested by Hit Wizards."

"But I thought you told me Scrimgeour thinks Shacklebolt wants his job," Harry said, rubbing his forehead. "So wouldn't he be disinclined to release him without due process?"

"The Hit Wizards threw some big charges though at Kingsley, and Scrimgeour's going to be expected to make a statement," Sirius said thoughtfully. "But it'll be his obligation to try and defend Kingsley, who does have a sterling record."

"Couldn't hurt him to take his time, though," Harry muttered.

"Harry, it sounds like you want Kingsley to be held in custody," Sirius said, his eyebrows rising with alarm. "He's on your side!"

"He's also got the biggest opportunity to mess up everything if he figures something – anything – out. And given his position within the Aurors, he'd notice any move Scrimgeour makes to aid me before anyone else, and he could alert Dumbledore to that. Face it, Sirius, he's a danger."

"More of a danger in the hands of the Hit Wizards where they can interrogate him and track him here," Sirius replied, looking carefully out the window again.

"Have they made any progress yet?"

"None so far," Sirius noted with a small smile, "And that's a damn good thing. We probably won't have to leave, the way things are going. For once, I'm thrilled that my father put every protective

enchantment known to man on this place – although the Fidelius is probably doing something to help that.”

“I gotta say, I expected them to come straight in here when you told me that about the Fidelius Charm and that I wasn’t under it,” Harry said with relief.

“So did I,” Sirius replied, running a hand through his hair. “Must be some other enchantments, I’m thinking. Mind you, I have been wrong before, and I was no slump at Charms back in the day. Your mum was better than me, but I could hold my own.”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned heavily against a bookcase. “Wish I had friends I could trust like you had Dad and Lupin.”

“You do have friends you can trust, Harry,” Sirius said intently. “Two of them are upstairs!”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, sure.”

Sirius tensed. “Is it really that bad?”

“Well let’s see... Hermione’s not speaking to me, she’s so furious, and Ron doesn’t know who or what to believe,” Harry replied bitterly. “Pretty much as I expected.”

“Harry, you kept them out of the loop early on, you should have known that they wouldn’t be pleased with that,” Sirius replied in a low voice. “Talking to them early could have had a big difference.”

“I need people I can trust implicitly, Sirius, like you and maybe Tonks, if I want to defeat Voldemort in the long run,” Harry replied, a dark, almost bleak look crossing his face. “Especially considering...”

“Considering what?”

Harry was silent for a long few seconds before looking up at Sirius. “I’m not having those dreams anymore, with Voldemort in them. None

of those nightmares or anything. And my scar hasn't hurt since the Dementor attack."

Sirius frowned. "That is odd. Did you tell Dumbledore about it?"

"I mentioned it the night I got in, and he had the same response you did... that it was odd." Harry put a forefinger to his scar. "It's weird, because I always thought that the pain would get worse now that he's back, and that I'd have more of those dreams, and before the Dementor attack, I was having a lot of those crazy dreams too. But now... nothing."

Sirius' frown grew deeper as he scratched his temple. "Do you think Voldemort's doing something?"

Harry shook his head. "For once, I... I don't think that's it," he replied quietly. "Actually, for once... I think it's me. I think I might have shut him out. Is that possible?"

"Unconsciously?" Sirius asked, cocking an eyebrow. "I've never heard of anything like this, but then again, I'm no magic theoretician. Practical spells tend more to be my thing. Nah, it'll be Flitwick or McGonagall or Dumbledore... hells, even Snivellus would know more here than I do."

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I'm not spending any more time with that bastard than I absolutely have to. Why he's still in the Order, I'll never know —"

The door suddenly banged open, causing both Harry and Sirius to start and draw their wands with surprise—

"I got it to him!" Tonks said triumphantly, her hair flickering through every colour in the chromatic spectrum in a dizzying swirl as she brandished a tightly sealed, rather official-looking piece of parchment in her other hand. "And he gave me a note to take back to Harry, too!"

Harry eagerly reached for the parchment, but Sirius grabbed hold of the paper first. "How do we know this isn't a trap?"

“Because I silently cast a Confundus Charm on him coupled with a Memory Charm after he wrote his response. And I may or may not have impersonated Harry a bit while I was in Scrimgeour’s office to seal the deal.” Tonks spoke very quickly, and she went as pink as her hair usually was once she was finished.

Harry’s eyebrows shot straight into his hairline as he stood up straighter. “What?”

“Come on now, Harry, you aren’t exactly hard to impersonate – I took a very close look at you earlier this morning – and Scrimgeour’s never seen you before,” Tonks said with a disarmingly devious smile. “Besides, he took me shapechanging from my regular form into your shape as you coming off of Polyjuice Potion, so it was a pretty nifty deception.”

“And he bought that?” Sirius asked incredulously.

“I may have had to Confund him,” Tonks replied, her smile slightly fading. Sirius groaned.

“You’re lucky as hell you weren’t arrested in his office –”

Tonks scoffed. “Most of the Aurors were busy, and after that letter was in Scrimgeour’s hands, he didn’t want to jeopardize any deals he could make by double-crossing ‘Harry Potter’.”

“And how did you explain to Scrimgeour where the real Tonks was, or how I got her hairs for the Polyjuice Potion?” Harry asked, raising his eyebrows again.

“I, ah, may have had to Confund him again.”

Sirius brought a hand to his forehead as he groaned again. Harry just shook his head.

“He was very pleased to see you,” Tonks said bracingly, trying to salvage her case again as her hair settled back to bubble-gum pink. “Well, see me pretending to be you anyways.”

“What?” Harry asked, astonishment and suspicion warring his voice.
“Why?”

“He’s wanted to meet you for a long time, he said, and the ‘business opportunity’ you wrote in that letter impressed him a lot.”

“What about the blackmail?” Sirius asked shrewdly. “He had to have seen that? Did he ask about it?”

“He brushed it off,” Tonks said, her smile fading completely now, “but he noticed it, I’m sure. His eyes went real cold, almost icy, when he read that part. He knows you have something – and he wants to meet you again, before the trial, to ‘discuss matters’ , and you can only bet what that’s about.”

“Did he say anything else?” Harry asked with a frown.

“He said everything he wanted to say was in that letter,” Tonks replied. “Cut it open, let’s see what he has to say.”

Sirius quickly slit the envelope open and pulled out the paper, which he passed to Harry, who read it in silence, while he and Tonks read over Harry’s shoulder.

“Harry... good god, Harry, he is devious...”

“It’s better than I expected and hoped for, Sirius,” Harry replied curtly, folding the letter back up and shoving it in his pocket.

“I don’t think you realize, Harry, the implications that are in that letter,” Tonks said hesitantly. “Scrimgeour’s not playing by the rules with what he’s asking.”

“Nor was I in my letter,” Harry replied heavily, “and he’s not asking me to do anything I wasn’t already prepared to do.”

Sirius was speechless, while Tonks could only gasp. Harry turned to the window and peeked out.

“So how long do you think this ‘investigation’s’ going to last before Scrimgeour personally shuts it down? I give it fifteen minutes.”

“That much?” Tonks asked sardonically, a dry edge to her humor. “I was thinking more like three minutes, tops.”

“It’ll take longer than that,” Harry said grimly. “Fudge is out there.”

* * *

“What do you mean, you’re shutting down this investigation?” Kemester snarled, his eyes going wide with fury as he glared at the Head of the Auror Office. “You can’t just come in here and –”

“This case was under Auror jurisdiction since Auror Shacklebolt took Potter in,” Scrimgeour said briskly, speaking more to Amelia Bones and the Minster than Kemester. “I’m restoring such jurisdiction to it, and that means I’m shutting this leg of the investigation down. You’re shooting at shadows here, Kemester, don’t deny it.”

“The Hit Wizards are your partners, Rufus,” Amelia Bones said, her eyebrow rising behind her monocle, “and it would be in extremely poor taste to disregard their contributions.”

“I’m prepared to disregard everything that they’ve given me, considering their arrest and subsequent interrogation of Shacklebolt was of far worse taste than anything I’m doing,” Scrimgeour said curtly. “Now Kemester, if you’d turn in your mission documents and the warrant you better have procured before you searched Shacklebolt’s home, you may return quietly to the Ministry and resume your duties.”

“Come now, Rufus, surely you’re not going to disregard all of the progress that Mr. Kemester has made here!” Fudge said suspiciously. “Don’t you want to catch Potter, have him face justice?”

“As much as anyone does, Minister, even perhaps a bit more, but this is a dead end. Trying to search for an incomplete address that none of us even know exists is a futile effort and a waste of time.” Scrimgeour briskly checked his watch. “Now if we could move along, I could provide some details about where I plan to take this investigation –”

“But everything Mr. Kemester has told us indicates that Potter is here, Scrimgeour!” Fudge said impatiently, waving a hand at the grimy buildings around the street. “The detection charms might not have worked, but that doesn’t mean Potter’s not hiding in the buildings.”

“And that’ll mean we’ll have to get the Muggle police involved with a search, which would be completely unnecessary because Potter’s not here,” Scrimgeour replied bitingly. “Minister, I respect your enthusiasm, but as a trained professional, I can tell when the trail’s gone cold, and considering how competent Potter is at running for his life, I feel comfortable making the statement that even if he was at some location along this road, he’s gone now.”

Fudge deflated somewhat. “So you do have a lead, then?”

“I have several ideas, many likely prospects,” Scrimgeour said reasonably, pulling out a small piece of paper. “Now if you would just take a look at this –”

“How much did he buy you off with, Scrimgeour?” Kemester growled, his patience finally vanishing along with the last shred of his reason. “Why else would Potter have gone to Gringotts but to buy you off – the only person who can save him!”

Scrimgeour did not answer for a few seconds, even as the other Hit Wizards gasped, and the nearby camera for the Prophet began clicking madly. Finally, Scrimgeour looked up from his paper. “Potter,” he said coolly, his lion-like eyes meeting Kemester’s furious glare, “has not even deigned to contact me. The search for him is ongoing, but I do know this – if he was anywhere close to this location, he

would have left a long time ago. The trail's cold, Hit Wizard – you're chasing shadows. Now if you would be so kind, your documentation."

"Wizard Kemester, this is both scandalous and insubordinate!" Madam Bones snapped, her shock quickly dissolving into anger as the Hit Wizard didn't move. "You better hope you have facts to back up your allegations at the inquiry into the numerous points of contention regarding this investigation, or else you'll be thrown out of the Hit Wizards! And when I thought the conflict between the MLE departments had sunk its lowest! Now please give Mr. Scrimgeour the requested papers this instant!"

Reaching slowly into his coat pocket, Kemester pulled out his stack of papers, notes, and warrants and straightened them. Then, his eyes blazing with rage, he slowly handed them to Scrimgeour, who flipped through them quickly before tucking them into a small bag.

"I assume you'll be wanting my wand too, as you're taking me into custody," Kemester said slowly, biting off every word.

"The inquiry will handle that," Scrimgeour said primly, straightening his spectacles. "Of course, the board will take into consideration your brother was killed in Potter's chase, but it does not," he added grimly, "excuse your actions, particularly relating to my office. Report back to your superiors, Kemester, and get back to your work."

"That would be me, Rufus," Madam Bones said as she glared at Kemester, who darkly returned her look. "I'll take care of this – send me a report once you have the details, Scrimgeour, I'll want to know."

Scrimgeour nodded tightly before spinning on his heel, Disapparating with a crack.

* * *

"They're gone," Harry breathed, sighing with relief. "Finally."

“Wonder why they left,” Sirius mused, more to himself than to Harry. “I thought for a few seconds that they’d be here all afternoon looking for you.”

“So did I,” Harry replied, turning away from the window. “So... now what?”

“Are you going to agree to meet with Scrimgeour before the trial?” Tonks asked, swallowing hard. “Discuss your... deal?”

Harry nodded. “I have to... don’t want to, but we’ve got to make these arrangements before I actually get before the tribunal – at least he guaranteed me that.”

“He knows as much as anyone that you’ll have a better chance there, especially considering he and Madam Bones run the damned thing,” Sirius said thoughtfully. “Still, somebody should go with you, in case Scrimgeour tries to pull something and capture you.”

Harry scoffed. “He’s smarter than that. He knows what I know.”

“Then he’ll try and kill you.”

“Sirius, he’s an Auror.”

“That only means he’s capable of it, especially since he lived through the First War,” Sirius said grimly. “Tonks, you’d better go with him, just as backup.”

“What about Dumbledore?” Tonks asked hesitantly.

“What about him?” Harry asked indifferently.

“He’s going to hear about the explosions at Gringotts, and if Hermione tells him anything...”

“He’s going to put two and two together,” Sirius finished, a frown crossing his face. “Damn it, you’re right, Tonks. He can’t find anything out until Harry’s been cleared, and that’ll happen at the trial.”

“Dumbledore will try to attend my trial,” Harry muttered darkly, “but Scrimgeour’s already agreed to my plan on that front. And we can’t change the date, otherwise he’d know something was amiss... can we get him out of the country?”

Sirius’ eyebrows disappeared into his hair. “Harry, we can’t just evict Dumbledore from the country!”

“We might not need to, though,” Tonks said thoughtfully, pacing around the room. “Kingsley’s arrest puts a huge wrench in Dumbledore’s plans, and he’ll want to do all he can to keep things hushed up. And if Harry meets with Scrimgeour tonight and tells him to keep the Gringotts issue quiet —”

“The Prophet’ll never go for that.”

“Harry, the Daily Prophet’s a parasite,” Sirius said, his tone a mix of exasperation and disgust. “It exists at the sufferance of the Ministry on the best of days. If they don’t want the story to be printed, it won’t be — Rita Skeeter was one of the few reporters that had the temerity to stand up to high level Ministry officials and report the dirt.”

“ So Scrimgeour blackmails the Prophet, shuts down my investigation, and gets me out of this?” Harry said, his voice incredulous as he tried to comprehend everything the Head of the Auror Office was doing. “Blimey, he must really want to keep those financial transactions hidden.”

“Either that, or he’s got something else he’s trying to hide,” Tonks muttered, scratching her chin as her pacing slowed.

“Either way, Harry,” Sirius said with a smirk, “you might just want to write Mr. Scrimgeour a nice thank-you note.”

* * *

“How is she?”

“You’re starting to care now?”

“Ron,” Harry growled, breathing heavily, “I don’t need this from you.”

“Sorry, it’s just that... look, why didn’t you just tell us what you were planning from the beginning?”

“Ron, you saw what Hermione was like this afternoon, and I tried to avoid the subject,” Harry replied irritably.

“You could have told me, Harry,” Ron replied, disappointment ringing in his tone. “I’ve been on your side.”

Harry closed his eyes as he tried to control his temper. “Ron,” he said quietly, “you have no idea how much I want to believe that, to trust you.”

“Then what’s holding you back?” Ron asked with mingled confusion and anger. “Damn it, Harry, I trust you! Look, I might be a bit uncomfortable with everything that’s happened, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have your back!”

“I know, Ron, it’s just...” Harry shook his head. “Look, I’ve got a lot on my mind, and there’s so many angles that I have to cover, and if I miss just one – just one, Ron – everything I’ve worked for is for nothing. I want to trust you – hells, I want to trust Hermione too – but I can’t afford to make mistakes. Not now, Ron. Can you use that, if anything?”

Ron shifted uncomfortably. “I guess... look, Hermione’s in there, and she’s none too happy about what she thinks you did.”

“And?” Harry asked, his voice abruptly tight. “Is there going to be a problem here?”

“She’s my friend as much as you are, Harry,” Ron replied, his voice sounding more awkward with each second. “I... Merlin’s pants, Harry, I dunno how to deal with this, and I don’t want us all... splitting up. The three of us have something good here, and I... well, damn it, I nearly lost that last year, because of that Tournament.”

“It won’t be because of anything I’ve done,” Harry replied quietly, but firmly.

The door slid open suddenly, and Harry saw Hermione, her hair frazzled worse than normal, her face flushed and red. But her voice was anything but controlled.

“On the contrary, Harry, it’s your actions that are responsible for all of this.”

“Hermione...” Ron began, but Harry cut him off quickly.

“Ron, please leave. I’ll talk to her.”

Ron swallowed hard. “I’ll... just be in the room – stop by when you’re done, okay?”

Harry nodded tightly, his eyes fixed on Hermione’s angry face as he stepped into the room.

As soon as Hermione had closed the door behind them, Harry spun on her, his own anger finally appearing on his face. “Damn it, Hermione, why are you trying to make all of this my fault?”

“Whose fault is it, Harry?” Hermione snapped back. “You’ve lied to us from the start, you’ve been hiding things from people who are only trying to help you, you’re –”

“Okay, stop there,” Harry spat. “How have I lied to you, when you didn’t bother to tell me anything all summer? And yeah, I have been hiding things, but maybe I have a reason.”

“Harry, we’re trying to help you, and so is Dumbledore! Your ‘plan’ the way I see it is going to make everything worse for the Order, and you’re lucky you got away with your life this morning –”

“I’m doing what I have to do,” Harry said in a low voice. “Nothing more, nothing less. Tell me, Hermione, what else was I supposed to have done when I got that letter, saying that the Ministry was coming to destroy my wand? I’ve seen Ministry justice, Hermione! They Kissed Crouch without a trial or hearing, and it looked as though I was going to get even less!”

“I’m not even talking about that,” Hermione replied heatedly. “I can understand accidents, especially on brooms, but not what you’ve done since. The Harry Potter I knew wouldn’t blackmail people or not trust his own friends!”

“Once again, Hermione, what else could I have done?” Harry growled, his hands beginning to shake with fury. “This is the only way I’ll get through this mess with my wand intact, and you know it!”

“There are other ways!”

“Really? Are we talking about your plan, Hermione, where I rely on Dumbledore to save my ass at trial? Do you think the Wizengamot’s going to give a damn what he says if they think he’s going senile, especially with the seriousness of these charges?” Harry shook his head with disgust. “No, Hermione, if I’m going to be the one that’s going to take out Voldemort, I need to learn to rely on myself, not on Albus Dumbledore – especially when he’s shown himself unwilling to help me. He refused to help train me this year, what does that tell you?”

“I’m... I’m sure he’s got a reason!”

“Not one he told me,” Harry replied coldly. “So yes, Hermione, I didn’t tell you what I was doing, because I expected something like this, and it turns out I was right.”

“The Harry Potter I knew wouldn’t do this,” Hermione snarled. “What happened to you, Harry? What happened to the Harry I knew who was... who was noble, and good, and –”

Harry was silent, and Hermione struggled for words even as Harry’s gaze bored into her.

“...What happened to the... to the Harry who was my friend? What happened to the Boy-Who-Lived?” She pointed at Harry with sudden conviction. “What happened to him, Harry?”

Harry shook his head with disappointment. “What happened to the Boy-Who-Lived?” he repeated, shaking his head with disgust. “He discovered that if he wanted to keep living, he had to grow up, and that things had to change, some for the better, and some for the worse.” He pulled open the door behind him and met Hermione’s eyes with his own, hers shining with restrained tears.

He stepped out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

* * *

“I must say I’m surprised that you were able to meet me on such short notice, Harry Potter.”

“I wanted to deal with this sooner rather than later, Mr. Scrimgeour, as we are both in rather precarious positions.”

“Agreed.” Scrimgeour folded his hands as he leaned forward across the table towards Harry, his eyes gleaming. “I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time, did you know that?”

“You told me that this afternoon, and I did not know that, but it makes sense,” Harry said coolly, matching Scrimgeour’s intense stare. “But despite that, this meeting must be kept short if this plan is to work.”

“Very true, very true. So, according to your letter, you will pledge your support to my political campaign if when Fudge retires –”

“Or is forced out,” Harry said coolly.

“You think that a possibility?”

“With Voldemort on the loose and with Fudge denying he’s out there? Of course it’s going to happen – it’s just a matter of time.”

“You seem adamant.”

“I saw him come back,” Harry replied, steel in his voice. “But I also know I won’t bother trying to convince you – it’s a losing battle.”

“I see things analytically, Mr. Potter – and I have not yet seen the evidence that Lord Voldemort has returned,” Scrimgeour replied.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. “You use his full name?”

“He is a worthy opponent, but I do not fear him, if he is indeed back,” Scrimgeour replied evenly. “A great wizard, to be sure, but withholding his name is showing him more respect than he deserves. But let’s not talk about that – the tribunal.”

“Yes.”

“You agree to the conditions?”

“As long as you agree to these.”

“Hmm... you want me to tell the Prophet not to report the Gringotts incident in tomorrow’s paper? Any reason why?”

“Not that you’re going to know.”

“Were you involved?”

Harry shrugged. “Can’t say. There’s a lot of Polyjuice Potion in the markets lately.”

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "Controls should have been placed on that potion years ago."

"Well, the ingredients being bloody expensive is a pretty good control," Harry replied with a disgruntled snort. "So?"

"I have no problem stopping the Prophet from reporting the Gringotts incident. And... you wish to keep Dumbledore occupied before the trial? With the issue with Shacklebolt?"

"As much as possible."

"Might I ask why?"

"Not really."

Scrimgeour scratched his chin. "I have no love for that Auror, and by the look on your face, you might feel the same. I can make things... difficult, in that area."

"Would you actually do that?"

Scrimgeour rolled his eyes. "I have no qualms doing it, if that's what you're saying. It'll send a message to Shacklebolt to keep his eyes away from my position. Do you have any problems with my proposals? Do you accept them?"

"For the most part."

"Is there a problem?"

Harry gave a bitter laugh. "I'm on the run, so I haven't had a chance to speak with my legal counsel, so I'm going with your conditions on the basis that they make sense to me. And turning myself in to get said counsel is not an option here, so don't think of suggesting it."

“Wasn’t thinking of that, actually. You plan to show up at the tribunal without legal counsel?” Scrimgeour’s voice was bland, but Harry caught a note of surprise in his tone.

“It wouldn’t be worth my while to procure it, as you well know,” Harry said, placing both palms on the table. “After all, this ‘trial’ should last about five minutes, even with the expected objections. It wouldn’t be worth my money.”

“Very true, very true... I’ve noticed that you’ve avoided discussing the last article in your letter. I must say, Mr. Potter, I’m a bit surprised you haven’t mentioned it.”

Harry shrugged. “If it’s not necessary to mention, I won’t bother.”

“It is a great concern to me, Mr. Potter,” Scrimgeour said, his voice abruptly cold. “I’m acting as I am by dismantling your investigation and not arresting you right now because of said information. Very few know of what actually happened, and I am genuinely curious how you found out.”

Harry was silent, his gaze mutely meeting Scrimgeour’s, giving absolutely nothing.

“You do agree to destroy said material after the trial, correct?”

Harry shrugged. “You can’t bring me back to the tribunal or the Wizengamot unless you have new charges, and I know you don’t have enough evidence to convict me of anything. Hell, it would be a fight to convict me even on these charges with the information you have. After all, I had just cause: why else would I use a Patronus Charm in front of my cousin if there wasn’t a Dementor there? I’m allowed to use magic in cases like that, as you well know?”

“Then why bother with this elaborate tangle?” Scrimgeour growled.

Harry shrugged again. “Perhaps I see an opportunity to obtain a new ally, someone who can... support my cause, in the future.”

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "What are you implying, Mr. Potter?"

Harry snorted as he got to his feet. "Sir, Voldemort's back, and the sooner the Ministry realizes it, the better it'll be for all of us. And as you might have guessed, the Boy-Who-Lived has an obligation to finish what he started." He raised a hand. "And I just thought you might want to be on the winning side for once, considering Voldemort'll be none too sympathetic to an Auror who fought him in the last war."

"I'm not joining Dumbledore's little gang of vigilantes," Scrimgeour said with amusement.

"You don't have to," Harry shot back, tapping the table lightly with his wand, "and he wouldn't want you to anyways. But I could use your support – and I'm willing to do what it takes to get that support, unlike others."

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "Is that a threat, Mr. Potter?"

Harry smirked as he moved towards Tonks was standing near the back of the room, her hood thrown low over her face. "Hardly," he replied, "but then again, I only threaten people who have something I need – or have something to hide."

* * *

"So?" Sirius asked anxiously.

"Mission accomplished," Harry muttered, gratefully accepting the bottle of Butterbeer Tonks rolled across the table as he sat down heavily. "He gave me what I wanted; I gave him what he wanted. Reciprocity. Does Dumbledore know anything yet?"

"He probably has some inkling of what's going on, but he won't be able to stop you," Tonks replied, shaking her head. "Blimey, I thought I'd see the day that we'd be plotting against Dumbledore –"

“It was bound to happen eventually,” Harry replied tiredly. He slumped as he leaned against the table in exhaustion. “What about Lupin or Snape?”

“Remus told me... that he’ll sit this out and not speak to anyone else if you swear not to get yourself caught,” Sirius said slowly. “And nobody’s heard from Snivellus. He’s probably lurking with his other master, if you know what I mean.”

“Probably,” Harry muttered morosely, taking a deep swig of his Butterbeer. He held his head up for a few more seconds before slumping, face-first, onto the table, sound asleep.

Tonks and Sirius exchanged glances.

“Guess he was tired,” Tonks noted. “He’s had a long day.”

“That he has.”

* * *

“Harry James Potter, of Little Whinging Surrey, you have been brought before this official Auror Legal Tribunal on the fourteenth of August, 1995, under four charges of manslaughter, two charges of magical assault of the third degree, evasion of arrest, and breaking the Statute of Secrecy and the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. All these actions occurred on the second of August, 1995, between the hours of five and ten in the evening. Is this correct, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded once. “It is, Madam Bones, your honour.” He chanced a quick glance around the courtroom, noting with a degree of surprise that the Auror tribunal hall – a long, wood-paneled room with a high ceiling, was nothing like the dingy dungeon where he had seen Barty Crouch Jr. being sentenced. But then again, that makes a degree of sense – charges of war crimes, like the way mine are falsely classified, can be charged here. Crouch was charged in the Wizengamot – primarily because he acted against civilians.

“And under the prior arrangement made with consent of the tribunal, you do consent to the dropping of the manslaughter charges and those relating to the Statute of Secrecy and the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery?” Scrimgeour asked, his voice icy as he looked down at Harry, standing calmly at the long bench set across the room.

Harry nodded once again. “Yes, your honour.”

“So how do you plead to the two charges of magical assault in the third degree and the charge of evasion of arrest?” Scrimgeour asked tersely.

Harry took a deep breath. This was it. And Dumbledore can’t stop me this time... it’s the only way...

“Guilty, your honour.”

The Aurors in the courtroom gasped, and the people on the benches behind Harry began talking. From across the hall, Harry could see Dmitri Kemester. He doesn’t look too thrilled at my statement, but I’m not surprised either... he’s losing everything, and when that inquiry finally happens, his job’ll soon follow...

Scrimgeour flipped open a file upon his desk. “Is there anything, Mr. Potter, that you wish to say before your sentence is assigned?”

Harry turned and looked at Kemester first before turning up to look at Madam Bones, whose expression was somewhere between shocked and stern. “All I can say,” Harry began carefully, the practiced words coming easily to his lips, “is that I acted... that I acted based upon what I knew at the time. People were coming to destroy my wand because I had saved my cousin’s life and soul, and I admit that I acted hastily in response.” He bowed his head, trying to conceal the smirk that was on his lips. “I accept responsibility for those charges.”

The crowd behind Harry was murmuring, but he paid them no attention, keeping his gaze on the two judges. He saw Scrimgeour and Bones exchange looks. As the Heads of their departments (albeit

Madam Bones having a slightly higher position over Scrimgeour), they were responsible for Harry's sentence. And Scrimgeour's already on my side... by Merlin, Kemester looks like he's ready to kill somebody...

"Well, Mr. Potter," Madam Bones began after a few minutes of whispered conversation with Scrimgeour, "with the consent of my fellow judge, your sentence is a fine of five hundred Galleons, to be payable to St. Mungo's Hospital for the treatment of those unfortunate Magical Law Enforcement officers you wounded in your escape. A further fine of one hundred Galleons will be paid to the estates of each of the unfortunate men who died in that maneuver involving the aeroplane –"

Kemester shot to his feet. "My brother's life," he growled, "was worth far more than a hundred Galleons!"

"Mr. Kemester!" Madam Bones snapped. "Compose yourself or you will be expelled from this courtroom!"

"You bought their lives, Potter!" Kemester roared. "That's blood money! THIS ISN'T OVER, POTTER!"

"Bailiff, remove the Hit Wizard from this courtroom immediately!" Scrimgeour shouted.

"Don't bother, sir, I'm leaving," Kemester spat, getting to his feet. He walked past the murmuring crowd and shoved the door open... to reveal the surprised and rather grim expression on the face of Albus Dumbledore.

"Hope you're bloody proud," Kemester hissed, shoving his way past Dumbledore and stepping out into the hall, disappearing with a crack.

"Case dismissed," Scrimgeour said coolly, rapping his gavel once against the bench.

The shocked expression on Dumbledore's face only grew as he moved through the crowd towards where Harry was writing something very quickly.

"Take this promissory note to Gringotts, they have the authority to withdraw the money from my vault," Harry said to the bailiff, giving him the note.

"You need to seal the note with blood, sir," the bailiff said gruffly.

"I do?" Harry asked, surprised. "How might I –"

"Just prick your finger and wipe it on that square on the note – the goblins will know from there," the bailiff said promptly, gesturing at a tiny edge protruding from the side of the desk. Wincing, Harry ran his finger along it, making a sharp cut. Closing his eyes, he wiped his bleeding finger on the note.

"Thank you, sir," the bailiff said, disappearing with a crack.

"Harry!" Dumbledore said, finally reaching him through the crowd. "The court case –"

"It was rescheduled, Professor, I'm sorry I couldn't contact you," Harry replied apologetically. "Everything's been settled, though."

"But... you pleaded guilty –"

"I did what I had to do, Professor," Harry replied seriously, looking up and meeting the Headmaster's blue eyes – which, for once, were not twinkling. Harry felt as though he was being X-rayed, but he did not back down.

"You should have informed me, I could have helped you," Dumbledore replied, his voice disappointed, and Harry could hear the slight note of betrayal in it.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but as you can see, I handled it."

Dumbledore looked at Harry differently at that second, almost speculatively, as if he was seeing something that he hadn't expected, like he was looking at Harry in a new light, from a different angle.

"You did not have to change the time, Harry, if you did not want me to attend," Dumbledore said quietly.

Harry was flabbergasted, but he struggled to keep the expression off his face, keep his reaction neutral. "I have no reason to turn down your help –"

"But forgive me, Harry, if I must disrupt your obvious merriment with some bad news... very bad news indeed," Dumbledore said gravely. "There was a disturbance in the Department of Mysteries this morning."

Harry frowned. "A disturbance?" He lowered his voice. "We shouldn't speak about this here, it's not safe –"

"Miss Tonks can wait for you, Harry, because I cannot return you to Headquarters just yet," Dumbledore replied grimly. "In any case, the reporters will not be here for another few minutes, so we have a bit of time, and this cannot wait. This disturbance confirmed my worst fears."

"Why would a disturbance in a Ministry department –"

"There is a hall inside of the Department of Mysteries known by some as the Hall of Prophecy. The disturbance was within that hall this morning."

Harry's blood ran cold. "Tell me you're kidding me. How?"

"We don't know," Dumbledore replied, his eyes flashing with anger. "But in the daily inspection this morning, a prophecy was found missing – and a prophecy can only be removed by the one who it was made for."

Harry swallowed hard. "He took it... he used the commotion around my trial as a cover."

"Yes, he did," Dumbledore replied softly. "This morning, Lord Voldemort took the prophecy – and you, Harry, are now in greater danger than ever before."

“Dmitri? Damn it, what are you still doing here...”

The Hit Wizard slowly looked up from the heap of papers on his desk, slowly rubbing his eye as he focused on Larshall. “I’m working, Reed. I’ve got a lot of... paperwork, to catch up on.”

“That’s bullshit, Dmitri, and you know it,” Larshall said disgustedly, shoving one of Kemester’s books onto the floor as he lowered his bulk onto the desk. “You’ve barely left your office since the inquiry. Was it something that was –”

“You know I don’t want to talk about it,” Kemester replied icily, turning back to his papers.

“Look,” Larshall said consolingly, “I know you’re not happy that Potter walked with nary a scratch, but the inquiry cleared you of any wrongdoing! You’re a free man –”

“When that little bastard walked, he disgraced the reputation of this office,” Kemester muttered, reaching for the bottle of rye shoved against the cubicle wall.

“You know that’s not true, Dmitri,” Larshall said, a worried note in his voice. “A lot of the other Hit Wizards are really happy that this entire issue’s over –”

“Pussy-whipped fucks, the lot of them,” Kemester spat after a heavy swig from the bottle. “The entire department lost its balls the second Scrimgeour starting looking at our files. Filthy cowards.”

“Okay, you know that’s not true,” Larshall said hastily. “There are a few who resigned over this –”

Kemester snorted. “Yeah, only ones like Charon, relics from the First War who were going to retire anyways and thought they could make a statement by taking a quick way out. They’re even worse.”

“How much of that rye have you gotten through tonight, Dmitri?” Larshall asked, taking the bottle and eyeing it critically.

Kemester shook his head. "Not sure. How much is left in there?"

"About half a bottle... don't tell me you drank all of this tonight!"

"Then I guess that's two and a half bottles, then," Kemester mumbled.

Larshall's mouth fell open. "You should be dead, not knocking back rye like it's Butterbeer! Damn it, Dmitri, we've gotta get you to St. Mungo's!"

"I'll be fine, I've got enough anti-alcohol potion in me to stave off poisoning," Kemester muttered, flipping through the page. "Did we ever get a full case file coming from Gringotts after Potter broke in there?"

"There's no proof of that," Larshall said sternly.

"Reed, you saw the evidence I had!" Kemester said furiously. "You know bloody well that Potter broke into Gringotts for something, and it's only his thrice-damned luck that kept us from catching him!"

"You're basing that on your gut instinct, and nothing else," Larshall shot back. "Look, the case file's out of our hands now, and we can't go back and try for a conviction on Potter, especially since the charges were dropped."

"I'd love to know what Potter said to Scrimgeour to make him drop those charges," Kemester growled furiously. "Even the Prophet didn't buy it – hell, at least they're on our side, painting Potter as the killer he is –"

"Never thought you'd be one to support that paper."

"They were on my side when nobody else was," Kemester growled. "Everyone was cheering for Scrimgeour's damned inquiry, and the Prophet thought it a right crime that I wasn't allowed to make a statement to the press on my side of the story."

“Potter wasn’t allowed to give a statement either –”

“Yeah, but that’s just Scrimgeour covering his own ass,” Kemester spat with disgust. “I’m sure that it was part of Potter’s plea bargain that he wasn’t to speak to the reporters about the case... ironic, isn’t it, that the two who knew the most about this mess were the ones who weren’t allowed to talk...”

“Dmitri, I know you’re not happy,” Larshall said slowly, “but you should really be getting home. You’re only hurting yourself by going through this mess... Bartholomew wouldn’t want you to be doing this to yourself –”

“Mention my brother’s name one more time in this cubicle,” Kemester growled, his eyes blazing dangerously, “and I fucking swear that you won’t leave the cubicle alive. Clear, Reed?”

Larshall swallowed hard. “Look, I know you’re not taking this well, but going over these case files until you’re blue in the face isn’t going to help anyone –”

“You never answered my question from earlier,” Kemester cut him off abruptly. “Did we ever get a full case file from Gringotts?”

Larshall frowned. “Wasn’t it part of the papers that Scrimgeour confiscated and moved to Auror filing?”

Kemester snorted. “Where’s it remains inaccessible to all decent men. Bloody wonderful. Can’t go requesting those documents now, can we?”

Larshall shook his head. “Maybe you should get some sleep –”

“I’ve got a lead here,” Kemester interrupted, pointing at the small scrap of paper on the edge of his desk with his wand. “And without those Gringotts files, it’s the only lead I’ve got.”

“Is that the paper... isn’t that supposed to be with Shacklebolt’s case file?” Larshall gasped. “Damn it, Dmitri Kemester, don’t tell me you’ve been stealing –”

“Will you relax?” Kemester whispered angrily. “No, I haven’t been stealing – it’s a complete duplicate of the scrap that I made with a little magic I learned in Arithmancy. I’ve been trying to cross-reference the writing to something I might be able to recognize, someone that both Potter and Shacklebolt would have known...”

“Don’t tell me you’re still thinking about that wild theory you have, with Shacklebolt and Potter both collaborating to keep Sirius Black hidden in this country, are you?” Larshall said with disbelief. “And what kind of magic are you thinking it is this time?”

“It’s got to be Fidelius,” Kemester muttered. “It has to be – why else would all of my detection charms fail on that street? This paper must have been written by the Secret-Keeper himself – it’s the only way I could have even gotten close to Grimmauld Place... and it’s a damn shame the rest of the paper’s completely consumed...”

“But who do you think is the Secret-Keeper –”

“I’ve got my theories,” Kemester said quietly. “Nobody would be idiotic enough to use Black as the Secret-Keeper, and the writing doesn’t match Shacklebolt’s or Potter’s, so it’s got to be a third party protecting them.”

“You still think Sirius Black is involved, though?” Larshall asked skeptically.

“He has to be,” Kemester replied curtly, “because why else would Potter go to Welmon? The missing link is Sirius Black, it has to be.”

“Only problem is that Black is really missing,” Larshall finished, running a hand through his bristly hair. “You don’t buy what Shacklebolt’s saying, that Black’s in Tibet?”

Kemester snorted. “Are you kidding me? Black’s in England, and Shacklebolt knows where he is.”

“But Scrimgeour said —”

“Scrimgeour, despite his reluctance to have anything to do with Shacklebolt, still bought his explanation like the rest of those weak-minded Aurors. They aren’t willing to face the fact that they might have treason in their ranks.” Kemester pulled the bottle out of Larshall’s hand and took a long swig from it. “And there’s still a missing member of this whole conspiracy — the one who supplied Potter with the explosives and Apparated him out.”

Larshall sighed. “It’s a great conspiracy theory, Dmitri,” he finally said, putting a hand on Kemester’s shoulder, “but that’s all it is — a theory — and you know that we can’t do a damned thing to put it all together unless you somehow figure out the Secret-Keeper and get the information out of him.”

“I know,” Kemester said quietly, setting the bottle down heavily. “Why are you still here, anyways?”

The heavy-set Hit Wizard tossed him a rolled copy of the Evening Prophet with a small grin. “Catch the latest?”

Kemester snorted as he untied the paper and flipped it up. “Fudge is up to his latest antics, I suppose... damn, what did Dumbledore ever do to him to earn this mess? I can support the Prophet up to a point, but this is ridiculous.”

“I know,” Larshall agreed. “I mean, the concept of a ‘Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team’ is just bizarre and a waste of Galleons, even if Fudge is touting it as some ‘force to defend against internal and external threats to Hogwarts’. Even the stupidest goblin can tell you that that’s bullshit, and you can tell Fudge is trying to undercut Dumbledore’s authority at Hogwarts —”

Kemester rolled his eyes. “It’s politics, that’s what I can tell you. Fudge is scared Dumbledore’s going for Minister, and Dumbledore... well, who knows what that’s all about?”

“He keeps making those statements that You-Know-Who’s back,” Larshall said in a low voice. “Maybe Fudge is trying to hush that up.”

“Probably,” Kemester muttered, “because until I see some proof, You-Know-Who’s as good as dead to me. That, along with him backing Potter’s release, is just more evidence that the old man’s finally going senile...”

His voice trailed off as he pulled the paper closer, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Larshall,” he said slowly, looking up at the Hit Wizard, “you read this article all the way though, right?”

Larshall shrugged. “Thought you’d be interested in applying for a position on that new ‘Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team’,” he replied simply. “Might be an opportunity to get closer to Potter...”

“And to Shacklebolt,” Kemester murmured, his eyes lighting up. “Wonder why Scrimgeour assigned him to the Auror branch of this group... it’s suspicious, that’s for damned sure –”

“Dmitri, forget the conspiracy theory, Black’s not important,” Larshall said sternly. “There’s spots open on the Hit Wizard side of this... probably smart that Bones is making this bilateral, considering how crazy Potter’s trial was. She probably wants to stem the anger before the Hit Wizards and Aurors get any more at each other’s throats.”

“It’s under Dolores Umbridge, though,” Kemester muttered, wrinkling his nose with distaste. “The woman’s a fiend... only reason she’s teaching at Hogwarts at all is because Fudge slammed that Educational Decree through the Wizengamot.”

“Yeah, and you thought the resignations from our department were bad,” Larshall muttered bitterly. “Marshbanks and Ogden both leaving in protest? If that’s not painted as a scandal by Fudge’s people at the Prophet, I don’t know what will be...”

“You’ve got to wonder, though, what else Fudge is planning,” Kemester mused. “He wouldn’t put someone like Umbridge at

Hogwarts unless he's got plans for the place... big plans..." He turned back to the paper and eyed it thoughtfully.

"You going to go for it?"

"I'll have to put up with Shacklebolt, and that won't be pleasant," Kemester reasoned darkly, "but Potter's going to be there, and if I'm lucky, I might get a lead that'll let me drag him back to the Wizengamot and put him in Azkaban for good this time."

"You think Bones and Scrimgeour will let you on the team?"

Kemester let out a bitter laugh. "I'm cleared, aren't I? They won't have a solid reason for keeping me out."

"Other than the tiny fact that you want Harry Potter dead."

Kemester's eyes flashed dangerously. "Retribution and death, Reed, isn't always the same thing."

* * *

Harry groaned with disgust as he slammed the door to his room shut and slumped against the wall. I bloody swear, another dinner like that and I'm going to start taking meals in my room. Why the hell do they just let Hermione talk like that... damn it, Sirius isn't even saying anything, but that's probably because he's got his hands full keeping Lupin under control at the table...

CRACK.

Harry's hand darted to his wand, but then the figure straightened and lit her wand, and he relaxed. "Damn it, Tonks, don't scare me like that! In the mood I'm in, a few more seconds and I would have cursed you –"

"A hair-trigger is never a good thing, Harry," Tonks said with a sly wink, "especially when it comes to scenarios like this."

“Or when it comes to your friends.”

Tonks was silent for a few seconds before sighing heavily and sitting on Ron’s bed. “Yeah, those too.”

“So who sent you up here?” Harry asked scathingly. “Sirius, Lupin, or Mrs. Weasley? None of them looked too happy when I left the table.”

“You know Molly disapproves of what you did, Harry, or disapproves of as much as she’s been able to glean from Kingsley and Remus, anyway. And Sirius, if anything, just wishes you would have stayed a bit longer – he doesn’t like backing you up on his own.”

“No wonder he wants me to trust Lupin so much,” Harry remarked bitterly. “Fat chance of that happening, the way things are going. I can’t trust him, especially when he’s taking Hermione’s side in this whole mess –”

“Harry,” Tonks said with exasperation, “Remus does have a point. There are no ‘sides’ in the Order – we have to be united if we want to have a hope of taking Voldemort down with Ministry support. It doesn’t help that we’ve lost Snape in this whole mess; even Dumbledore hasn’t heard from him –”

“Who cares?”

“He was one of our best sources of information in the Death Eaters,” Tonks replied with a shrug, “and we could have used his information, especially with finding out how the hell Voldemort got that damned prophecy even with Sturgis Podmore down there. Dumbledore still forbidding you from telling people about it?”

“He told me not to tell anyone, but that’s not the reason why I’m keeping quiet,” Harry said sharply. “The less people who know about it, the better. It’s already bad enough that Voldemort’s got it, and he’s probably told his Death Eaters by now too –”

Tonks blew out a quick breath. “Harry, Dumbledore’s on your side – you’ve got to know that by now.”

Harry fixed the young Auror with a steely glare. “He refuses to train me, under some bullshit excuse that ‘the Ministry can’t find out,’ and you wonder why I can’t trust him. Come on, Tonks, if you were in my shoes, wouldn’t you be angry?”

“Harry, ‘angry’ and ‘paranoid’ are two very different things,” Tonks said quietly.

Harry turned away, stifling a disgusted snort. “Is that what they’re saying about me? That I’m becoming paranoid? And here I thought with Moody that the Order tolerated a certain amount of that –”

“And that’s why Alastor still supports you,” Tonks finished.

“Yeah, and counting him, you, and Sirius, that’s about the only ones,” Harry spat.

“Harry, you know there’s more than –”

“Who, Tonks? Who else is backing me here?” Harry growled. “Hermione and Kingsley are united in agreement that I should be back before the tribunal and likely sent to Azkaban, Lupin and most of the Weasleys are content to sit on the fence until something finally breaks through that just because Dumbledore said it doesn’t automatically make it right, and Ron doesn’t know who or what to believe, because he’s got some misguided, undying belief that Hermione’s always right!”

“Dumbledore’s still on your side,” Tonks said firmly, “and he always has been, Harry. The fact that you don’t trust him – and Sirius and I both agree on this – is starting to get a bit ridiculous. Okay, so maybe he won’t train you, but he was still prepared to defend you in court and do everything he could to make sure you got back to Hogwarts this year.”

Harry shook his head as he stared at the floor. "He used me, Tonks," he replied listlessly, "and the way things are going, he'll just keep on using me if I don't take control. He only told me about the prophecy when there was 'blood on my hands' – and those were his words, not mine – and who knows what other information he's keeping from me? If I'm the one who has to kill Voldemort, I'm going to need all the information I can get. And how can you explain his excuse not to train me? It doesn't make sense, Tonks!"

Tonks raised her hands helplessly. "Look, Harry, I'm still on your side, and you're right, it doesn't make a lot sense, what Dumbledore's trying to do, but it doesn't mean you shouldn't trust him –"

"I dunno, Tonks," a new voice said from the door as it was roughly shoved open. "The way things are going, I'm not so sure I'd trust Dumbledore either."

Tonks sighed. "Look, Sirius, I know you're not happy that he's not letting you escort Harry to the Hogwarts Express, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't trust –"

"It's not that which is bothering me," Sirius interrupted, tossing a paper onto the bed as he quickly closed the door. "Take a look at his most recent press release. The Dumbledore I knew wouldn't accept something like this."

"What the hell is this 'Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team,' anyways?" Harry asked with a frown as he picked up the front page of the paper. "Seems a bit stupid to me, if anything."

Tonks rolled her eyes. "The idea is sound, and I'm sure that's Dumbledore's rationale for allowing it. And it's not a bad idea to have a bilateral group of Hit Wizards and Aurors protecting Hogwarts from internal and external threats, especially with Voldemort out there. The only problem is –"

"It's a pretty blatant attempt for Fudge to assert his control over Hogwarts?" Sirius growled.

“Well, there’s that, and there’s the problem of the whole bilateral thing too,” Tonks admitted. “There’s been a pretty strained relationship between the Hit Wizards and Aurors since Scrimgeour’s inquiry into Kemester’s investigation. Frankly, the only reason that man still has a job is because of political games, and Kemester knows it too.”

“He’s going to end up on this team, isn’t he?” Harry asked with disgust, tossing the paper to Tonks.

“Probably,” Sirius replied with a scowl. “Amelia Bones is a peacemaker, and she’ll want to appease Kemester in some way for the disgrace that was the inquiry. Plus it’ll give the Hit Wizards and Aurors an opportunity to keep an eye on him, prevent him from doing something rash –”

“Like killing me,” Harry said flatly.

Tonks and Sirius exchanged glances. “His brother is dead, Harry,” Tonks began cautiously, “and he thinks you escaped justice.”

“How many damn times do I have to reiterate that I did what I had to do?” Harry snarled. “I thought you two would have understood this –”

“Harry, we’re both here because we’re on your side,” Sirius interrupted. “Don’t get angry with us because of this –”

“I’m not angry with you,” Harry said, raking a hand through his hair with frustration. “I’m angry with Dumbledore and his terrible excuse for not training me, and I’m furious with Hermione’s new attitude... I just hate being used, and both of them want to use me for their own ends.” He sighed heavily. “At least you two don’t want to use me –”

“Do you really think we would have backed you up for this long if we wanted to?” Tonks asked wryly. “Harry, Sirius already told you that we’re on your side – hell, we want to see Voldemort gone as much as anyone.”

Harry gritted his teeth. "A pity so many people don't want to cooperate – or give me the tools I need to finish the job. Did you find out anything about that file, Tonks, about the closing of the Potter vaults?"

"The friend I've got in Magical Finance says that she'll take a look at it, but I don't think you'll be able to get it reversed without revealing that you stole the file," Tonks replied helplessly. "It doesn't help that everything happened nearly fourteen years ago – Magical Law back then, with Voldemort active, was even more screwed up than it is right now."

"There could be something in those vaults that I could use," Harry growled. "Hell, at the very least I could use the gold, considering that settlement put a pretty big dent in my own account! Is there any way I can get the case file reopened, brought back before the Wizengamot?"

"With the way the Prophet's painting you?" Sirius said, shaking his head. "You'd be lucky to get past the preliminary hearings. No legal counsel's going to take your case, Harry, it'd be legal and political suicide. And the way things are going right now, Harry, unless you manage to find some good compelling evidence in that file, enough to get it reopened, there's no way that you've got a case."

"I'll have my friend look it over, Harry," Tonks added sympathetically, "but I'm not sure you going to get anything out of it."

"Can you trust this friend?"

Tonks shrugged. "I'll be with her when she starts looking at it, and I've got a mean Memory Charm when I need it."

"Damn it," Harry replied heavily. "So much for that option. Sirius, does the Order have any idea how Voldemort managed to get the Prophecy?"

Sirius snorted. "Sturgis was reportedly guarding it, and he doesn't have a damned clue how it went missing – typical of him, but that's

not the point. Problem now is nobody knows how Voldemort and the Death Eaters are going to react to the new knowledge, and even though Dumbledore's shrewd ideas tend to be right on occasion, it doesn't work well when even he doesn't have a shrewd idea."

Harry shook his head. "Well, I can't exactly waste time wondering or predicting what Voldemort's going to do, and that means I'll have to react to it when it comes. Frankly, I'll have my hands full at Hogwarts already... Sirius, did you manage to get any information about the First War?"

"Some," Sirius replied uneasily, "but not a lot, unfortunately. I can't go around asking a lot of questions either – Dumbledore knows I had something to do with your whole plan, and it's tough to be circumspect. I've got what I remember, but that's not going to be enough if you want to take on Death Eaters."

"Well, why be circumspect about it?" Tonks asked exasperatedly. "I'm sure the new members of the Order – myself included – wouldn't mind having a full breakdown of what everyone remembers about the First War. I mean, it couldn't hurt –"

"But do you think Dumbledore will actually try and stop any plans I make?" Harry asked thoughtfully. "I mean, it's benefiting him too – even if we can't trust each other, it doesn't mean we have to be enemies."

"I honestly don't know, Harry," Sirius replied, tossing up his hands. "I mean, I thought he'd be training you this year as soon as you found out about the prophecy, but he's not doing that, and some of his other logic isn't making much sense either –"

"Maybe we should try and find out Dumbledore's motives before we do anything else," Tonks said with a small grin. "It's going to be better than us guessing."

"You think you could figure that out, somehow?"

“There might be a way we can discover it,” Tonks murmured, a smile growing across her face. “He won’t say it out loud – he’s far too smart for that – but he might let things slip, he’s only human. If I join that bilateral team, I’ll likely have to liaison with Dumbledore in some capacity, and that could give me an opportunity –”

“Will Scrimgeour let you join the team?” Sirius asked, cocking an eyebrow skeptically.

“Sirius, I’m one of the better Aurors in the department, and I’m currently not on any major investigations. It’s a prime position for me.” Tonks shrugged. “Might be a bit of trouble with Kingsley, though – he’ll suspect that we’re up to something.”

“Does he know you’re involved with us?” Harry asked sharply. “We can’t have any leaks –”

“There are a lot of suspicious coincidences that were involved in this whole mess, particularly with the Gringotts incident,” Tonks said with a helpless shrug. “He’s bound to have picked up on something.”

“And Shacklebolt’s not stupid either,” Harry muttered. “I’m still not convinced, Tonks, that you being on that team will get us any new information on what Dumbledore’s planning –”

“It might not,” Sirius agreed, “but it’s not a bad idea either. It’s good to have someone to give you information from the inside –”

“And if Kemester makes a move against us, I’ll hear about it before anyone else will,” Tonks finished, a smile spreading across her face.

Harry clenched a fist. “You know, of course, that Voldemort’s going to try infiltrating that group too. And with that Ministry woman running it, you might not get as much information on Dumbledore as we might need –”

“Maybe not, but I’ll be able to witness his reactions first-hand, and as a Metamorphmagus and a master of disguise, I’m a very keen judge of character,” Tonks replied, her smile widening.

“And besides,” Sirius said suddenly, “Voldemort doesn’t need a new spy – he’s already got Snivellus at Hogwarts.”

“Providing the ass hasn’t left the country or just died on us,” Harry finished darkly. “Does anybody know where he is? He knows more than he should about what happened with my case, particularly if he broke through any those charms without my knowledge and was eavesdropping on us—”

Sirius abruptly stiffened. “It might be better if we didn’t find him,” he said in a low voice, “or if nobody found him. With what he could know – it could ruin everything –”

Harry felt a chill going down his spine. “And it’s no surprise Dumbledore wants to find him so much. If Snape knows enough –”

“Everything could be at risk,” Sirius finished grimly.

* * *

“So you’re saying, Severus, that you suspect Potter influenced Scrimgeour in some way?” Voldemort asked, lightly spinning his wand around his long fingers. “Bribery, coercion, or blackmail?”

“Knowing Potter and Black, likely blackmail,” Severus Snape replied in a low voice, his dark eyes glittering in the dim light of the hall. “Neither have the cunning to do anything more... sophisticated.”

“What of this ‘Nymphadora Tonks’?” Voldemort growled. “Is she a threat? Could she have orchestrated part of the plan?”

“A low-ranking Auror,” Snape replied dismissively. “Potter or Black likely convinced her that their cause was just, and she went along for the ride.”

“And you do not know the details of their plots because?” Voldemort snarled.

“My Lord, Miss Tonks would have likely detected the breakage of her protective charms,” Snape replied smoothly. “She is an Auror, after all.”

“And you suspect Dumbledore still searches for you because he wishes to know Potter’s plans, which he suspects of which you know?” Voldemort finished, a small grin forming on his pallid face.

“That, and the fact that he needs his potions professor and spy,” Snape replied, his lip curling.

“Interesting,” Voldemort mused, turning away from Snape to pace around the circle of Death Eaters. “Potter’s actions have irrevocably tarnished his reputation and have damaged the trust between him and Dumbledore – not to mention the other members of the Order or his friends. This could serve to our advantage – particularly if Potter can be kept occupied with those dilemmas.”

The Death Eaters around the circle were silent as the Dark Lord continued to pace.

“I no longer need to take action against Potter,” Voldemort said finally. “The prophecy, of which Potter is likely aware of the contents, does not dictate which of us must act. It will take time he does not have to track me down or start an attack, and his resources are precariously limited – which allows me the time to execute my own plans, particularly while Dumbledore is occupied in squabbles with the Ministry. Have you had any success with the Dementors, Yaxley?”

“They still wish to deal with you, my Lord,” Yaxley replied heavily. “My negotiations can only be taken so far.”

“Understandable,” Voldemort said, abruptly halting in his pacing and turning to Snape. “I have a new mission for you, Snape, one of great importance.”

“I live to serve you, my Lord,” Snape replied coolly.

“ You will return to Dumbledore and submit yourself to his interrogation,” Voldemort said slowly, his red eyes glittering. “Tell him everything about Potter’s plans that you know. Dumbledore will likely confront Potter, and this will further destabilize the trust between them, and make my execution of plans within Hogwarts all the easier. Also,” he added, a cruel smile spreading across his face, “tell Dumbledore that I wish that Harry Potter begins Occlumency lessons as soon as possible.”

A look of confusion briefly crossed Snape’s face. “But... wouldn’t that...” His voice trailed off as his eyes met Voldemort’s.

“ Wouldn’t Occlumency lessons make Potter a more troubling opponent, my Lord?” Lucius Malfoy asked, frowning slightly with bewilderment.

“If Potter ever received them, they would, Lucius,” Voldemort replied softly. “But Dumbledore does not dare train Potter while the Ministry is at Hogwarts – Fudge’s paranoia would make such an attempt, if discovered, disastrous. And Potter’s blatant antagonism towards Snape would make even private lessons with his Potions Master impossible.” Voldemort stepped closer to Snape. “And after all, distrust is a deadly enemy – a very deadly enemy. You understand my plan, Snape?”

Snape nodded once, his eyes not leaving Voldemort’s.

“Good,” Voldemort said, his eyes fixed on Snape’s, as if he was trying to read his mind. “Nott!”

“Yes, my Lord?” a stooped Death Eater asked quickly, his hoarse voice echoing in the dim hall.

“Get Draco and Theodore from upstairs,” Voldemort said slowly, his eyes not leaving Snape’s. “They have a job to do.”

“My Lord,” Lucius Malfoy said in a low voice after Nott had hurried out of the basement hall, “after everything I’ve done for –”

“Lord Voldemort does reward his followers, Malfoy,” Voldemort said icily, “but your son does have an assignment, and there’s no getting around it. You should be thanking me, if anything.”

“Why?” Malfoy asked, suspicion and fear mixing in his voice.

“Your son will survive.”

Author's Notes: well, it's been a lot of work, but I've finally got the next chapter of Renegade Cause finished! As always, thanks for the reviews, and as always, read, review and enjoy!

“I have both good news and bad news tonight,” Dumbledore began clearly, standing at the end of the table in Sirius’ kitchen. “I’ll begin with the bad news – there has been no leak regarding Lord Voldemort’s forces, and no traces were found by the Department of Mysteries in their investigation of the theft of the prophecy.”

Most of the Order members sitting around the table groaned with frustration. Tonks, her eyes warily following the Headmaster’s expression, chanced a quick glance over at Sirius, who was sitting near the end of the table, next to a sullen-looking Lupin. He nodded quickly with approval, and she turned her gaze back towards Dumbledore, who was waiting patiently for the chatter around the table to die down.

“You’re meaning to tell me that they found nothing at all in their search?” Dedalus Diggle asked curiously. “Surely You-Know-Who must have left some sort of trace –”

“The Department chose not to enlist the aid of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” Kingsley Shacklebolt said coolly. “And Unspeakables, talented as they are, aren’t trained investigators. They probably wanted to keep the issue internal, especially given the controversy in MLE as of late and because of our involvement.” He threw an angry glare at Sturgis Podmore, who was shifting uneasily in his seat.

“So is there any point now in continuing to bribe them for access to that Hall?” Arthur Weasley asked tiredly. “I mean, there’s nothing else for us to guard down there, now that the prophecy’s gone. Most of us will be able to catch up on our sleep.”

“That duty has already been discontinued,” Dumbledore replied firmly. “Patrolling in the Hall of Prophecy is no longer required.

“Our contact’s been Obliviated, right?” Mad-Eye Moody growled. “We don’t need another leak to Voldemort.”

“It will not be necessary,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling. “Laertes Rawling is supportive of our cause, and is currently willing to continue funneling information to the Order. We will continue to have a steady source of information from the Department of Mysteries.”

“But what good is that?” Sirius demanded. “If the prophecy’s gone –”

“That department will likely still be one of Voldemort’s targets, Sirius,” Dumbledore replied seriously. “There is dangerous magic stored in that department, and Voldemort’s agents will certainly try to infiltrate it. Augustus Rookwood is living proof that Voldemort has an interest of what happens in that area of the Ministry.”

“Speaking of the Ministry, did Fudge provide us with an explanation about this ‘Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team’?” Professor McGonagall asked testily. “Or why he’s placing them under the command of Dolores Umbridge?”

“I have no power to overrule the Educational Decrees without the support of the school governors and the Wizengamot,” Dumbledore said with a trace of a sigh. “Support, unfortunately, in which the Order does not have. The most we can do, in our current situation, is to have our own agents within that group. Luckily for us, Scrimgeour approved the assignment of both Kingsley and Tonks to the team. However, their presence will not diminish the obvious threat.”

“Kemester,” Moody growled. “Why Bones put him on HAIT –”

“She did it as compensation for the inquiry, Alastor, you know that better than anyone,” Kingsley replied tiredly. “He needs some way to rebuild his reputation, disgraced as he is. The way things are, no Wizengamot court will hear a case he brings forward.”

“He is a security risk, especially to the students,” McGonagall said stiffly, “and from what I’ve heard of this Umbridge woman, she won’t exercise the necessary control over him, especially considering Hogwarts is a school, not a Ministry office.”

“And there’s the possibility Voldemort will make a run at him,” Sirius growled. “Dumbledore, can’t you petition Bones to have Kemester removed? He’s a threat –”

“The Hit Wizard knows better than to take any action towards Harry while I remain at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said briskly, “and I do not believe that Voldemort would go after Kemester as a mole, given that he is already under suspicion. However, Sirius, you do indeed have a point about Voldemort. He may indeed take the opportunity to place an agent on that team, for espionage purposes. It is fortunate that I will be directly involved with briefings regarding the team, to ensure cooperation between the team and Hogwarts staff.”

There were dubious looks exchanged at that remark, and Tonks could barely restrain an incredulous chuckle. Yeah, and with the hotheads that I’m sure Kemester’s going to bring with him onto HAIT, Dumbledore will certainly have his hands full. On the plus side, though, it’ll mean I’ll be able to have more contact with Dumbledore, and that’ll help me track his motives.

“Something doesn’t make sense, though,” Mr. Weasley said slowly, scratching his chin. “Why would You-Know-Who try and put an agent in HAIT when he already has Severus Snape as a loyal agent?”

Sirius snorted. “Presuming anyone’s found the bastard yet.”

“On that note, Sirius, I have some good news,” Dumbledore began, a small grin crossing his face. “Severus Snape has been found, and after some discussion, is willing to retake his position as Potions Professor at Hogwarts, albeit reluctantly.”

“Well, it’s about time, too!” McGonagall snapped. “Term begins in a few days!”

“What about the Order?” Lupin asked with a frown. “Is he... coming back?”

Dumbledore sighed. “He refuses to set foot in Grimmauld Place as long as either Sirius or Harry is living here. He has no qualms continuing to pass information to us, but he will no longer attend any of our meetings.”

Sirius smirked. “Good. Looks like Snivellus picked up a few brain cells in his absence.”

Dumbledore shot Sirius a sharply disapproving look. “It would be far easier for all of us, Sirius, if you two resolved your differences –”

“You’re wasting your time, Professor, it’s not going to happen,” Sirius cut him off, all happiness gone from his face as he leaned back in his chair. “Snivellus isn’t welcome in this house – not like he ever was before, but there are some lines that are not crossed.”

“Would you care to enlighten me –”

Sirius glared at Dumbledore. “I’m sorry, Professor, but this is a personal matter – and I’m not backing down. Snape doesn’t come here, period.”

Tonks caught the slight edge in Sirius’ voice, and she understood his plan instantly. Sirius knows that Snape’s got an inkling of what Harry’s done and what he’s planning, and unless Dumbledore’s willing to change Headquarters – unlikely – this action keeps Snape somewhat isolated from the rest of the Order. He might be able to tell Dumbledore, but he won’t go out of his way to inform the rest of the Order like he might have if they were all gathered at a meeting with him. Smart move, Sirius, even if you are risking antagonizing Dumbledore...

The Headmaster stared at Sirius for a long few seconds before shaking his head. “It is a shame that some old wounds run so deep.”

“With respect, Professor, I don’t give a damn about what Snivellus thinks,” Sirius growled, bringing his chair back down off its back legs with a solid clunk. “He’s not stepping in my house, and it’ll be a bloody miracle if there are no conflicts between him and Harry this year. Why you aren’t letting him drop Potions –”

“ He’ll write his O.W.L just like any other student, Sirius,” Dumbledore said, steel in his voice, “but Harry’s recent behavior is concerning. From what Professor Snape has told me, there has been a marked shift in his behavior and actions in the past month, particularly regarding his treatment of others and who he trusts.”

“You can’t believe a word that comes out of that traitor’s mouth –”

“ Sirius, shut up,” Kingsley snapped. “I trust Snape’s rational judgment a lot more than I trust yours these days, particularly regarding the mess of Potter’s trial and conviction. I still think that Scrimgeour knows more than he’s telling –”

That’s because he does, Tonks thought, a twinge of unease filling her gut. Please Sirius, control your temper, you don’t want to give away anything that’ll jeopardize Harry’s plan...

“ - And that Harry somehow got in contact with the head of my department while I was Hit Wizard custody,” Kingsley finished in a low voice. “The question that I’m asking – and that Kemester’s likely going to be asking too, if he gets the opportunity – is how the hell did Potter manage to convince Scrimgeour to let him off so easily. And I know you were involved in this somehow, Sirius, don’t even try to deny it.”

Sirius glared at Kingsley. “I’m not saying anything, Shackbolt, and you’ve got no proof one way or the other –”

“That’s enough,” Dumbledore said firmly, stopping the argument instantly. “I do not know the complete reasons behind the shifts in Harry’s behavior, and I fear that part of those shifts may have been influenced by my own decisions as of late. Regardless of that, he remains as distrustful and angry as ever, with no signs of this

behavior abating. I want those assigned to HAIT and his professors to keep a close eye on him, in case he attempts to do anything reckless or dangerous that could place him in extreme danger.”

Sirius shook his head. “Harry’s not that stupid, Professor.”

“He is far from stupid, Sirius, I agree,” Dumbledore said with a nod. “After all, by some action of his, he managed to escape from the Wizengamot practically untouched, and deceived me in the process. He has become stronger and craftier than I could have hoped or expected for at his age. But I fear that in the process he is alienating people that only wish to help him.” The professor nodded at Lupin, who closed his eyes, an expression of pain on his face. Tonks shifted uncomfortably in her seat – even though she didn’t agree entirely with all of Harry’s plans, she knew as well as anyone that the werewolf couldn’t be trusted any more. He contacted Snape of all people, and in the process likely tipped Dumbledore off. I may not like that Harry’s distrusting, but at least he’s got a reason.

“It doesn’t help,” Mr. Weasley said finally, “that the Daily Prophet’s been smearing Harry all summer, and a lot of people are going to believe what the Prophet says. He’ll lose friends over it, even in Gryffindor.”

“Harry’s never had a lot of friends,” Sirius said roughly.

“And that is why he cannot afford to lose the few he has, for they can provide him assistance unlike any others,” Dumbledore finished somberly. “Unfortunately, we may already be too late to salvage one of those friendships.”

None of them needed the name, even as the thought of it lingered over the table like Mundungus’ tobacco smoke, and Tonks felt a sick feeling of sadness and frustration fill her gut as she thought of the unfortunate circumstances and mistakes that had torn that relationship to shreds.

Hermione.

* * *

“Look, Harry, I know you’re angry with her –”

“Hermione’s angrier with me than I am with her, Ron,” Harry interrupted bitingly as he leaned against the wall of the bedroom he shared with Ron. “I just can’t trust her anymore.”

“You should at least give her another chance!” Ron said with frustration. “Damn it, Harry, wouldn’t it be more mature for you to come out and say something first in this mess?”

“And you’re lecturing me on maturity now?” Harry remarked scathingly. “After last year?”

Ron’s cheek went pink. “It was a mistake on my part, Harry, I know that, but this is different! You think I like being stuck in the middle of you two? That you won’t trust me because you think I’ll tell Hermione about your plans or whatever you did –”

“She already figured enough of it out on her own, and she doesn’t approve,” Harry snapped. “I’m not wasting my time trying to convince her otherwise. Did she put you up to this?”

“I hate seeing my best friends at each other’s throats, all right?” Ron snarled. “By Merlin, Harry, you might be angry, but that doesn’t mean –”

“As I said, she’s more angry with me than I am with her,” Harry replied evenly. “And I’m not wasting my time and effort trying to make her see my end of this. She knows why I acted the way I did, and if she doesn’t like it, we have nothing more to say to each other.”

“Why don’t you just put it behind you!” Ron exclaimed, his temper finally coming to the surface. “She doesn’t like what you did – I get it. We all can move on with our lives –”

“Ron, you don’t get it!” Harry said heatedly, slamming a fist against the wall of the bedroom with an audible thud. “If I can’t trust her, how

can I rely on her against Voldemort? How can we ever have a rational, logical conversation again if I can't trust that she'll go running to someone with my plans or ideas? How can we..." He swallowed back the rush of bile in his throat. "How can Hermione and I still be friends, then, Ron? If you can tell me how Hermione and I can maintain an honest, trusting relationship, then by all means do so! But until then –"

"If you don't trust her because she disapproves of what you did –"

"Ron, it's more than that!" Harry growled, his own patience fading. "I'm sure Hermione's got an idea of what I've done. Bravo to her, then. And I'm sure you've got some idea by now too, Ron. You're not stupid."

"Thank you," Ron replied coolly.

"It's the truth, Ron, and so is this: things are only going to get worse." Harry put emphasis on every word, his eyes blazing in the dim room as they locked onto his best friend's gaze. "You know what I'm going to have to do in the end, and Ron... look, I can't jeopardize my chances at Voldemort for Hermione's approval."

"She knows that, Harry –"

"If she does, she's in denial of it," Harry spat. "Let's face the facts here, Ron: either I kill Voldemort, or he kills me, but it would be phenomenally stupid of him to go looking for me, because he knows I'll have to come after him eventually. 'Neither can live while the other survives', that's what the damned prophecy said, and that means if I want to have a life, Ron, I'm going to have to kill him – and probably not just him either. No, he'll have a few lines of Death Eaters that'll fall first."

Ron swallowed hard. "Harry, you know I'll back you up when the time comes, and so will Hermione –"

"Ron, use your fucking head!" Harry snarled, his patience finally burning away. "Hermione won't back me up because she's got some

deluded idea that Dumbledore's plan to react instead of actually doing something is the right one, and since I'm the linchpin of it, I must blindly follow! But a reactionary plan won't work this time – hell, that's probably why the Order's got no bloody clue what to do now that Voldemort's got the prophecy. So I'm going to have to do something, and I'm going to have to use expedient methods to do so."

"Harry –"

"And neither Hermione nor Dumbledore are going to approve of those methods, Ron, oh no," Harry continued, completely ignoring Ron. "Those methods are dirty and nasty and likely won't be featured on the cover of Witch Weekly or The Daily Prophet. But you know what, Ron? When it comes down to it, I really don't give a fuck, because if I don't do something, people are going to die, and the longer this mess is drawn out, the worse it's going to get. I can't just sit back and wait until Dumbledore's ready to help me, because during that time, Voldemort's going to be moving and making my life a living hell to draw me out so he can finish this, once and for all." Harry snorted with disgust. "Damn good strategy, really."

"Harry, look –"

"Funny thing, though, is that Dumbledore already knows that I'm going to have to kill Voldemort in the end, and he doesn't mind being the man behind the scenes, pointing me towards him. He doesn't mind using the same tactics I'm talking about – he just doesn't want me using them." Harry gave a bitter laugh. "The power behind the throne doesn't like it when the throne is vacant and the king is thinking for himself!"

"Harry –"

"And Hermione's the same damned way, except she's content to follow the rules, to be manipulated and used and sacrificed like a pawn on the goddamned chessboard –"

“Harry, I get it!” Ron interrupted, blowing out a breath of exasperation. “Damn it, Harry, I understand, but all of that doesn’t matter, now. You don’t bloody need to rant about it either! Dumbledore’s not stopping you from hunting You-Know-Who –”

“He’s making damned difficult,” Harry growled, “and even you can’t deny that!”

“Okay, fine,” Ron said impatiently. “Damn it, Harry, Lupin was right – you are getting bloody paranoid! All I’m saying is that I’m tired of being stuck in the middle between my best friends. You think I like this – having to hear both you and Hermione rant on this? I know it’s going to be hell at the end when you’re facing You-Know-Who, and I know you might not trust Dumbledore anymore, but you know what, Harry? I don’t care. There are no ‘sides’ or ‘factions’ in this mess, and I’m bloody sick and tired of hearing about it! In the end, it’ll be like Dumbledore said a month ago: you’ll do what you want, and so will he. He won’t stop you from trying to kill You-Know-Who, and he’s not trying to stop you now!”

“Not yet,” Harry replied grimly.

“Not ever,” Ron replied heatedly. “Harry, I still want to be your friend, and I’m sure deep down, so does Hermione, even if she doesn’t want to admit it. The difference between me and her is that she doesn’t like the way you do things.”

“And what about you?” Harry asked coolly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Ron threw up his hands. “I don’t bloody know what you want me to say, Harry! In the end, You-Know-Who’s got to go, and I’d prefer that I don’t lose both my friends in the process. Can you at least understand that?”

Harry looked at Ron’s frustrated expression for a long few seconds. Finally, he nodded. “I can understand that, Ron, I really can. I only wish Hermione could.”

“Give her a chance,” Ron said, a pleading note in his voice.

Harry shook his head. “Ron, you know the truth of this as well as I do: even if I gave her a chance, she wouldn’t take it.” He pulled open the door to the bedroom and stepped out in the hallway.

“Harry...”

He looked back at Ron, standing alone in the center of the bedroom they shared. “I can trust you, Ron – I know that now – but I can’t trust her. I’m sorry.”

Then he slowly closed the door and walked down the stairs, not noticing the three flesh-coloured strings shooting back down the hallway.

* * *

“Any new information?” Harry asked as Tonks quickly closed the door to the drawing room behind her.

“Just a second,” she replied as she raised her wand and started muttering.

Harry turned to Sirius, an incredulous look on his face. “It’s that important?”

“We don’t want to be overheard,” Sirius said grimly, his hand tracing the thin sheen of dust on the glass cabinets in the room. “And to think that Molly wanted us to have this house completely cleaned before you went back to Hogwarts...”

Harry laughed bitterly. “I think a court case before the tribunal is slightly more important than cleaning up this place, Sirius, and considering how it went...”

“I think that should be enough,” Tonks said, stowing her wand quickly in her pocket as she locked the door. “I layered a few of the

charms – there's no way Snape or anyone else will be able to eavesdrop this time."

"So they found Snape, then?" Harry asked disappointedly.

"Yep," Sirius spat, "and he's willing to go back and teach at Hogwarts. Outright refuses to set foot here, but I just figure that's an added bonus."

"Dumbledore wasn't pleased with that –"

"Tonks, when it comes to this, it doesn't matter what Dumbledore cares about," Sirius cut her off bluntly. "He can find a new Headquarters if he wants Snivellus to attend our meetings."

"So we now have to assume that Voldemort's got some inkling of what I did with Scrimgeour," Harry said, clenching his fists with frustration. "Snape might not know all the details, but it's still too much."

"It's not like Voldemort can do much from in hiding –"

"He broke into the Ministry once already, Tonks," Sirius muttered, rubbing his unshaven jaw. "And if he can neutralize Harry in some way –"

"The case files that Scrimgeour has," Harry growled. "My case files, and the ones he confiscated from Kemester during the inquiry. If Voldemort leaks those out –"

"Or to Kemester," Tonks murmured. "Damn it, Harry, you're right."

"Worst of all, there isn't anything we can do to stop it," Harry said, blowing out a breath of frustration. "Tonks and I will be Hogwarts, and Sirius is stuck here. I guess we've got to rely on Scrimgeour's agreement, then."

"That's precarious," Tonks said with a snort.

“He’s still your boss, Tonks.”

“Doesn’t mean I like the man, particularly after seeing those files and financial statements,” Tonks shot back. “Don’t trust him anymore, either.”

“But from his perspective, what’s the gain in releasing anything, or allowing them to be released?” Sirius asked with a shrug. “In short, there isn’t any – he’ll have to reveal his part in this conspiracy, and that’ll ruin his political career. He’ll want to keep those files well-protected.”

“What about Voldemort?” Harry asked, his eyes gleaming. “Any new information?”

Sirius snorted. “Snape’s probably told Dumbledore something, but I didn’t hear it, and he didn’t tell the rest of the Order either. Other than that... nothing. It’s like Voldemort’s dropped off the face of the planet.”

“Probably exactly what he wants us to think,” Tonks added, wrinkling her nose. “But we can’t do much about that either.”

“What about that bilateral group the Ministry set up?” Harry asked sharply. “Anything new about them? Any luck convincing Dumbledore _”

“To throw Kemester off?” Sirius finished with a scowl. “I wish. Nope, he’s still on the team.”

“On the plus side, so am I,” Tonks added brightly. “And that gives the three of us a big advantage, especially with my Metamorphmagus ability.”

“You can funnel information between me and Sirius,” Harry reasoned, a small grin breaking onto his face. “That way we could stay in communication... even though we already have those mirrors _”

“Let Tonks keep the mirror,” Sirius said suddenly, beginning to pace. At Harry’s skeptical expression, Sirius chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m not losing my mind, Harry. Tonks’ll likely be close to Hogwarts anyways, and she’ll be able to do more for you than I will... at least while I’m still stuck here.” He gave the glass cabinets and the massive family tapestry on the far wall a disgusted glance.

“Any luck getting that changed?” Harry asked sympathetically.

“Not a bloody chance,” Sirius replied heavily. “But at least this way, I’ll be able to funnel some details about what the Order’s doing to you, so you can work on your plans.”

Harry scowled. “Right... my plans.”

Tonks cocked an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“When is there not?” Harry replied bitterly. “I don’t have any clue what Voldemort’s planning, and that’s forcing me to react to him rather than the other way around. The only real plan I’ve got is to accumulate as much information on him and the Death Eaters as I can, and start training on my own, like I did before the Third Task a few months ago.” He shrugged. “I mean, it can’t hurt. Wouldn’t be bad to get an edge up on my schoolwork too – apparently O.W.L. year is brutal.”

“It is,” Tonks and Sirius answered at the exact same time.

“Wonderful.”

“Is... is Hermione going to be –” Tonks began tentatively.

“No,” Harry said flatly. “She’s not going to be involved. Ron... maybe, but that’ll be on a ‘need-to-know’ basis.”

“Fred and George are still on your side,” Sirius said fairly. “And I’m sure Ginny would do anything you asked of her.”

“Yeah, about that,” Harry said uneasily. “Is it just me, or has she been spying on me?”

“She’s a teenage girl, Harry,” Tonks replied with an easy smile. “Teenage girls spy on everyone. Speaking from experience, of course.”

“I don’t think she outgrew whatever crush she might have had,” Harry said, scratching his chin idly, “and the last thing I need right now is that kind of complication.”

Sirius smirked. “Most guys your age would be killing for it –”

“Sirius, I have other priorities,” Harry interrupted testily. “If anything, it’s getting a bit unnerving.”

“You’ll be able to avoid her at Hogwarts, you shouldn’t need to worry about it,” Tonks said bracingly. “Besides, given the unpleasantness that’s bound to come up with HAIT this year, I’m sure you’ll have other things to worry about.”

“I need more allies,” Harry muttered. “In and out of Hogwarts. Ones that I can trust.”

“What about that Fleur girl you met at the bank?” Sirius asked with a frown. “I’m sure she’d be willing to help you.”

“Yeah, as soon as I return the Potter case file, and I’m not doing that until I find out whatever happened to the rest of my parents’ money,” Harry replied tersely. “I don’t know, Sirius, even if I could trust her –”

“She could be an ally either way, Harry,” Tonks said with a shrug. “Really, the more people you have on your side outside of Hogwarts, the better. And she’s certainly competent – I mean, she was picked as a Triwizard Champion, right?”

“It doesn’t solve the problem of reestablishing contact, though,” Harry said, frustrated. “I need to meet with her in person if I want this contact to be completely secret, and there’s not many opportunities left for you to do that before Hogwarts.”

“Why don’t you just meet up in Diagon Alley?” Sirius asked suddenly, his eyes lighting up. “I’m sure she’d be willing to meet with you – and you have an easy alibi. I mean, who’s going to question a student going shopping for school supplies?”

“Didn’t Dumbledore request that Molly handle the supplies this year?” Tonks asked with a frown. “Not that I disagree with the plan, but –”

“It does give me an alibi,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I’d have to be careful, though. But I’m not sure if making a trip to Gringotts would be particularly wise right now, and I’m sure that Lupin will bring that up.”

Sirius deflated somewhat. “I didn’t think of that,” he conceded. “I can redirect Remus’ questions, but that doesn’t solve the Gringotts situation.”

“Do you think Fleur could get you in without an investigation or search?” Tonks asked, a small grin forming on her face. “You could rendezvous in Diagon Alley, she could escort you into Gringotts, and then afterwards you two could have your talk.”

“It could work,” Harry finally said after a few seconds of thought. “It still seems too simple, though. And it’s not like hiding in plain sight will work much either – one sighting by a reporter and everything goes to hell, and given the way that damned Prophet keeps plastering my photo on the front page, likely everyone in the damned world knows my face by now.” He looked up at Sirius, and the bitter expression returned to his face. “And even though I was cleared and I paid my fine, it won’t be pleasant walking around in public.”

Sirius looked grim. “Harry, believe me, I know how you feel. Hell, imagine what it would be like for me – pretty much the same scenario, except I spent twelve years in Azkaban over it.”

“Do you think you could get the message to Fleur, Tonks?”

Tonks smirked. “Easily. You’re learning.”

“Well, the less traceable I am, the better, because odds are Kemester’s still going to be looking for a way to haul me in,” Harry replied with a shrug. “I’m assuming you’re coming.”

“Of course she is,” Sirius replied, cocking an eyebrow. “Undercover, of course, but you need someone there in case everything goes sour.”

“I think you just want me to dress up like Nymphadora Vuneren again, Sirius,” Tonks replied mockingly.

Sirius shrugged. “It’s a damned good cover story, if I do say so myself. And besides, I’m not the only one.” He shot a salacious wink at Harry, who shook his head and tried to keep the dull redness from creeping up into his cheeks.

“When are you thinking about meeting Fleur?” Tonks asked, wisely not commenting on Harry’s embarrassment.

“As soon as possible,” Harry said quickly. “Can you send the letter?”

“Not a problem.” Tonks replied easily. “I’ve got a bit of a holiday before joining the HAIT team anyways – hell, nobody will miss me.” She winked at Harry. “Although,” she added in a feigned sultry voice, “I doubt Miss Vuneren would say the same when she walks down Diagon Alley –”

She couldn’t say anymore, because Sirius had burst out laughing and Harry was shaking his head, a surprisingly rare smile on his face.

* * *

“Got a response from Fleur?” Sirius asked as Harry slit open the envelope Fred had tossed him from across the table.

“Think so,” Harry replied, quickly tearing open the envelope and pulling out the slightly creased note. It was short, as if it had been dashed off with only a minute’s notice.

Fortescue’s ice-cream shop, tomorrow at three. Ask for Miss Delacour – I’ll be waiting.

Sirius frowned. “Seems awfully abrupt for a girl like her. Isn’t she French?”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with it, but I think you’re right,” Harry replied in a low voice, noticing both Fred and George watching them intently. I’m fairly sure they can be trusted, but it’s better to be safe than sorry... “Something’s gone wrong.”

“We don’t need to assume that, but there’s something strange about this,” Sirius said tensely. “You want more backup?”

“It’s too risky, Sirius,” Harry muttered. “I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got the feeling that she’s being watched.”

“By who?”

“No idea, but it’s worrying,” Harry replied darkly, “and I’m starting to think that my case file’s not as closed as Scrimgeour claimed.”

* * *

“Well,” Tonks said, straightening her cloak primly, “are you ready for this, Harry?”

“No.”

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Come on, Harry, it won’t be that bad. And think of this – if they’re looking at me, they won’t be looking at you.”

“Load of consolation there, Tonks,” Harry replied wearily. “All right, let’s get this over with.”

A few seconds later, the archway had opened up, and Harry and Tonks stepped into the crowded alleyway. As Harry had expected, the wizarding alley was packed with people – mostly students and their parents, getting supplies for school. Seems busier than usual this year, Harry thought to himself. If the wizarding world is expanding this much, Hogwarts is going to start getting really crowded...

“You know, people are starting to stare at us,” Harry muttered to Tonks. “I should have brought the Invisibility Cloak –”

“You wouldn’t have been able to use it effectively here,” Tonks replied quickly, her eyes scanning the crowd warily. “Fortescue’s is on the left over there – I’ll be at Twillfit & Taddings if you need me.”

“Isn’t that place a poncy shop for rich purebloods?” Harry asked wryly. “Why would the Nymphadora I know be spending any time in there?”

“Oh shut up, you.”

“It’s Harry Potter, look!”

Although all of his instincts screamed for Harry to turn around and see the person who had shouted out his identity, he didn’t look back. I’m not giving him what he wants... he’s trying to provoke me...

All at once, he began to hear the murmurs of the crowd as he continued to walk – angry murmurs, most of them.

“It is Potter, what do you know...”

“He shouldn’t be allowed in public, after what he did...”

“Prophet says he’s a murderer now, just like Black...”

Harry closed his eyes against the rage rising in his chest. They’re ignorant, all of them, he thought to himself, focusing his eyes on the

sign of Florean Fortescue's ice-cream parlor. I can't let myself be provoked, I can't give in...

Someone shoved him, roughly, and he nearly stumbled. He turned and saw two young men, disgusted expressions on their face as they scowled at Harry.

"Watch where you're walking, criminal filth," one of them said. "You don't belong here."

Rage was rising up in his gut, but he forced it down as he turned away, his hands clenched tightly into white-knuckled fists.

"What?" the man shouted. "Got nothing to say to me, Potter? Think you're above us now? You should be in Azkaban, Potter! Fucking prison, where freaks like you belong!"

There was the sound of breaking glass, and Harry turned to see a particularly jagged hunk of glass from a shattered bottle whistling at his face –

"Evanescio," Tonks said, her voice dripping with contempt as the glass vanished out the air. Harry's hand went towards his own wand, but at the look on Tonks' face, he thought better of it. The last thing I need is an excuse for the Ministry to haul me in –

"That was crystalline glass, you idiot! You're gonna pay for that!" a scrawny potion-maker shouted, staring at the glass bottle that the young man had grabbed off his display table outside the apothecary and broken.

The man snorted. "Make Potter pay for it: he doesn't mind buying things – particularly people's lives."

"Harry, leave," Tonks whispered, her eyes glaring daggers at the smugly smiling young man and his grinning companion. "I'll deal with them."

Harry nodded with agreement and picked up the pace, moving through the crowd briskly and ignoring the looks of hatred from those he passed.

* * *

“There was trouble, wasn’t there?” Fleur asked, moving to rise from her booth seat, but Harry gestured for her to stay down.

“Yeah, but it’s being dealt with,” he replied, letting go of the breath he didn’t realize he had been holding as he sat down. “Fortescue didn’t want to let me in here either.”

She cocked an eyebrow at that. “Because of this mess regarding the Prophet –”

“Partially,” Harry replied heavily. “He doesn’t want to lose customers, and I can understand that, at least.”

“This is an ice-cream parlor, not top cuisine!” Fleur hissed indignantly.

“Better not let Fortescue hear that,” Harry warned her in a low voice. “He likes his ice cream, that man does.”

“Indulges in his own stock?”

“I would,” Harry admitted with a shrug. At the blonde’s incredulous expression, he raised his hands in exasperation. “What? It’s damned good ice cream!”

“I don’t think you contacted me to discuss ice cream, Harry,” Fleur said quietly.

“True enough,” Harry replied. “I need your help.”

“Again?”

Harry was stunned. "You... you remember what happened at the bank? I thought –"

"The Confundus Charm combined with the Stunning Spell was good, I don't deny it, and it kept the investigators away, but I do not forget what happened in the archives," Fleur replied, a trace of a grin on her face. "The combination of the spells left me extremely confused and unable to provide any useful recollections, and by the time I had remembered, the Ministry investigation had been halted and I had left Gringotts before the internal investigation could reach me."

"What?" Harry said, his eyes going wide. "You – you left Gringotts?"

"It was your advice that gave me the idea, Harry," Fleur replied simply. "I took a job at the Ministry in the Department of Magical Finance, where the few things I actually learned in Gringotts have come to good use."

"Doesn't help me, though," Harry muttered.

"You seem disappointed. I thought you would be happy –"

"It's not that, Fleur," Harry said hastily. "I just need a way into Gringotts and around any sort of suspicion the goblins might still have, and I thought you could have been able to help me... bypass some of those difficulties."

Fleur pursed her lips. "I might be able to get you in, but Harry, the goblins technically could not stop you from entering Gringotts, even without my help –"

"But they could make life very difficult or notify the Ministry," Harry said darkly, "and neither of which I want to happen."

Fleur's thin eyebrows narrowed. "What are you planning this time, Harry?"

"I still have the papers relating to my parents' vaults, which apparently were sealed by the Ministry nearly fourteen years ago,"

Harry replied evenly. "I want the vaults unsealed, and I want to know why the financial documents in that folder were woefully incomplete."

"Incomplete?"

"Things were missing," Harry growled. "No documentation what was in the vault, no transfer statements, no trial or hearing transcripts, not even a press statement or clipping from the Prophet. That folder was filled with legal filler papers, and I want to know where the real documents are."

"Welmon would have a heart attack if you 'visited' him again, if that's what you're planning," Fleur noted, amusement in her tone as she sipped on her drink. "But you are likely heading in the wrong direction, I think."

"How's that?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"The Department of Magical Law would have full court transcripts of anything that occurred within that timeframe, and the Department of Magical Finance would likely have paperwork as well," Fleur said thoughtfully. "Probably in their archives."

"Could you access it?"

Fleur shook her head. "I would require clearance I do not have, and will not likely be able to acquire, at least not for a few years."

"Well, it was worth a try," Harry muttered.

Fleur leaned forward, her eyes intent. "What is this about, Harry?"

"Are you being followed?" he whispered, as he leaned closer, his eyes not leaving Fleur's.

"Watched, nothing more."

"What? Why didn't you –"

“There is a difference between being watched and followed, Harry,” Fleur said tightly. “Being followed requires effort, and it means that the pursuer cares about the target. Being watched just implies that eyes may be upon you.”

“Magical surveillance?” Harry asked sharply.

Fleur shrugged. “Possibly. I’m not sure, but I know that there is someone attempting to keep an eye on me.”

“That isn’t good for me,” Harry growled. “Not good at all. Any idea who?”

“My guess is that it is my superiors in the Ministry,” Fleur replied, her eyes darting around the ice-cream parlor. “Even though the investigation into Gringotts was shut down by Scrimgeour, I have reason to believe that they would keep an eye on those who were involved – and I’m one of the few they could track.”

“So they haven’t managed to identify the explosive residue yet from the fireworks?”

Fleur frowned. “So you did rig the explosives.”

“Wasn’t me – Weasley twins set it up, but that’s not the point. Did the Ministry ever find anything?”

“I don’t know, Harry. All I know is that before Kemester’s inquiry, any files related to Gringotts were closed. According to rumor, Scrimgeour had them personally sealed, and I had no desire to interfere.” She sighed. “Especially considering that extradition would not be difficult, given my position.”

“They’d throw you out of the country?”

“It is not a big loss, but it would be a mark on a record that has remained spotless.” Fleur crossed her arms over her chest coolly. “I have no desire, at the current moment, to return to France.”

“But your family –”

“They are not a concern,” Fleur replied icily. “You have not answered my question, Harry, and you asked for me. What do you want?”

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his eyes growing cold. “I want a contact, someone I can trust and rely on while I’m at Hogwarts, and you’re one of the few people who fit the criteria to a tee.”

“How can I,” Fleur asked suspiciously, “be able to help you? You’re still going to be at Hogwarts.”

“Information,” Harry said immediately. “You remember from Dumbledore’s speech at the end of term, when he said that... that Cedric was killed by Voldemort?”

Fleur swallowed hard. She probably feels the same pain I do about it, Harry thought to himself.

“I remember,” she whispered.

“Well, Voldemort’s alive and active again in England.” Harry shook his head as he ran a hand through his hair. “Hell, I don’t even know if Voldemort did anything in France, but he sure as hell did a lot here.”

“There were a few things he did,” Fleur admitted, “none that could be traced back to this ‘You-Know-Who’, of course, but there were rumors...”

“Voldemort wants me dead,” Harry said quickly, “but the Ministry refuses to even acknowledge that he’s back. Dumbledore’s been trying to do something about it, but it’s been ineffectual. It doesn’t help that Fudge is getting paranoid, thinking that Dumbledore’s going to seize control of the Ministry.”

Fleur scoffed. “That’s ludicrous.”

“Who said Fudge was the pinnacle of intellect here?” Harry shot back. “Now look, Voldemort’s already active, and the more time he has the more dangerous he’ll become. According to Dumbledore, I’m supposed to be the one to kill him, but... well, he and I have had a... parting of the ways, I think would be the best way to describe it. The point is that I’m trying to build a network – a friend of mine calls it an ‘information chain’ in which I can get the information I need to plan against Voldemort.”

“And you want me in that chain?” Fleur asked, her eyebrows shooting up with astonishment. “Why me?”

“Because you didn’t turn me in at Gringotts, and that makes you a hell of a lot more trustworthy than a lot of people,” Harry replied evenly, placing both palms flat on the table. “I’m not asking you to compromise your job or your safety, but I need information – anything – that could help me with Voldemort. I don’t know what he’s planning, I don’t know where he’s going... he’s well-trained at operating in secret, and I need all the help I can get tracing the clues.”

“What do you even want me to do?” Fleur asked, her sudden business-like tone filled with interest. Harry breathed a little easier. She’s going for it. – I’m making progress here...

“Just keep an eye out for anything unusual in the paperwork or in the gossip,” Harry said tensely. “Unmarked packages or letters, rumors, whispered conversations that seem out of the ordinary, particularly any of the members of these families.” Pulling out a small scrap of paper, he tossed it to Fleur, who quickly tucked it into her cloak with surprising efficiency.

“Is that all you want?” Fleur asked, cocking an eyebrow. “It does not sound difficult –”

“If you can, I want you to inform me of anything strange that the Ministry’s doing in your Department,” Harry said in a low voice.

Fleur gave him an incredulous look. "You honestly think that You-Know-Who would bother with finance when he can coerce and blackmail others?"

"It's not him I'm worried about," Harry muttered, his hand slowly going to his wand, his eyes moving to the doorway of the parlor. "We should get going – is there a back exit in here?"

"How should I –"

"Never mind, there it is," Harry replied, getting to his feet and shielding Fleur from view. "We need to go – now. I think you've got a follower."

Fleur's wand was out in a flash, a steely expression on her face. "Not for long, I do not –"

"Not in the shop, let's go!"

Harry kept an eye on the man approaching the counter for ice cream as he carefully walked with Fleur towards the small door at the back of the shop. He had seen the man before – speaking with Kemester outside of Grimmauld Place. This can't be a coincidence... but how did they find me? If they got Tonks... no, don't think about that...

Fleur was through the door first, and before the heavy-set man could receive his change from Fortescue with his ice cream, Harry had followed her.

They were both breathing fast as they came around to the front of the store, stowed their wands, and began walking down the alley, which seemed even more crowded than normal.

"Do you have a plan?" Fleur asked, not making eye contact with Harry – they both knew it would be too obvious.

"Twillfit & Taddings, to pick up one of my friends, provided she got there as planned," Harry replied. "It's just past Ollivanders on the right..."

“You know you’ll have to double back if you want to use the Leaky Cauldron to leave,” Fleur said calmly. She knew that nobody would be paying attention to their conversation, and in the heavy crowd, it didn’t seem like anybody had taken much notice of Harry either. Not yet...

“I’ll see if we can Side-Along Apparate out of here,” Harry replied, trying to keep his voice steady as he scanned the shop windows. “Shouldn’t be hard I’ve done it before –”

He frowned as he saw the door of Ollivander’s, and the sign on it. That’s strange... why would the shop be closed during business hours...?

He looked inside the storefront window and his eyes went wide. There’s someone there... he’s lighting something... it’s –

Grabbing Fleur, he dove for the ground, as Ollivander’s exploded behind him.

Author's Notes: sorry about the wait again (and Rewriting The Song fans, I promise I will have a chapter up soon!), but here's your next chapter for this story. Thanks for all the reviews so far, particularly from the few people who took the time to write some pretty interesting analysis and criticism. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“What the bloody hell –”

He groaned, and rolled on his side. He could smell ash and cinders, along with a smoky smell that seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite place it...

“Harry, are you all right? Harry?”

“I'm fine,” Harry grunted, shaking his head quickly, trying to clear his senses. Fleur was already scrambling to her feet, her cloak covered in soot and her eyes wide with a mixture of astonishment and fear.

“Can you stand?”

His trainers scrabbled against the slick cobblestones, and a second later, Harry had pulled himself to his feet, his robes and cloak in disarray and covered with dirt. His eyes went wide.

“Oh fuck –”

Ollivander's had been gutted. Flames licked the splintered timbers, and Harry could hear the crash of a breaking beam inside. The windows had been completely blown out, glass strewn around the street. Whatever explosives were used, they sure as hell were powerful... and concentrated. There's virtually no collateral damage, and probably no casualties... except –

“Damn it, Ollivander's likely in there!” His wand was out in a second, but Fleur's hand was on his arm faster.

“If he was a wandmaker, those who destroyed his shop would not risk his loss,” she replied in a low voice. “If he was as talented as they say –”

“They would have taken him alive, as many wands as they could, and then blown the place,” Harry finished darkly.

“Death Eaters?”

“Most definitely,” Harry growled. “Damn it, they’re already moving –”

“It’s Potter!”

He turned quickly, his wand already going up, but it was too late. Suddenly, he was conscious of the noise – the screaming, the shouting, the hatred –

“He blew up Ollivander’s shop!” the heavy-set man from the ice-cream parlor shouted, pointing a finger at Harry, his eyes wide with a blend of shock and rage. “Arrest him!”

Harry’s own wand snapped up, but Fleur was faster, hitting the first three attackers with jinxes before they could even take a step. Screams erupted from the crowd, intermixed with shouts of rage and rustling as wands were sliding up. More were coming... circling around them. We’ll be outnumbered fifty-to-one, Harry thought, a sick sensation filling his gut.

Suddenly, he felt Fleur’s hand slip into his and squeeze tightly, even as a dozen wands were rising into the air. He felt her spin away from him, and redoubled his grip even as light was blossoming from the wands –

A second later, he stumbled against the wall that had appeared out of nowhere. To Harry’s shock, it appeared that Fleur had Apparated them out – directly into a tiny changing room that was thankfully unoccupied.

“What the hell –”

Fleur swore in French. “Not as far as I had hoped... merde!”

“Where are we?”

“Change room for Twillfit & Taddings, I think,” Fleur muttered quickly, stowing her wand and carefully readjusting her cloak. “You said your contact was here –”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect –”

“Only one to a change room!” a surprisingly bellicose female voice shouted, and Harry could only raise his wand as a richly dressed stout lady appeared outside the open door. “I don’t tolerate that sort of behavior in my shop, young lady –”

“Stupefy!”

Harry turned to Fleur in amazement as the woman toppled to the floor. “That was a quick draw,” he said, impressed. “I thought I was going to have to curse her.”

“I didn’t just get into the Triwizard Tournament on good looks, Harry,” Fleur replied coolly, sliding her wand back in her cloak pocket as she cautiously stepped into the hall. “And besides, you know you can’t cast any spells without the Ministry detecting them –”

“Right, I know, and that’s why I let you take those three outside Ollivander’s,” Harry replied tensely. “Come on, we need to find my contact and fast. That fat man was with Kemester when they were hunting for me earlier.”

“He’s with the Ministry?” Fleur asked, her eyes widening. “Do you think –”

“If Kemester’s not down here with his full search party in a few minutes, I’d be surprised,” Harry replied grimly. “Any idea how big this place is?”

“Fairly large – it’s one of the best clothing retailers in Diagon Alley –”

But Harry was already moving, pulling a mirror out of his pocket and looking carefully into it. “Nymphadora!”

Tonks’ voice came back clear and strong a second later. “Harry? What the hell is going on out there? Sounds like some kind of riot’s going on outside –”

Harry’s head snapped up – he had heard the voice coming from two places at once. And that means she’s within hearing distance. “Nymphadora, where are you?” he called

“I’m changing!” Tonks shouted back, her voice slightly muffled and distinctly irritated. “Damn it, Harry, I thought you weren’t going to blow anything up this time –”

But Harry was already moving down the aisle of change rooms, stopping outside Tonks’ door. “Are you decent?”

“When am I ever?”

“Do you have clothes on, at least?” Harry asked exasperatedly.

“Yeah, but –”

“Can you unlock the door, Fleur?”

Fleur cocked an eyebrow. “Harry...”

The sound of shattering glass split the air from inside the shop, and Harry heard several shouts. Damn it, they’re here!

“Nymphadora, hurry up!”

The lock on the change room door clicked, and a disheveled Tonks came into view, a perplexed expression on her face. “What happened _”

“I’ll explain when we get back to Headquarters,” Harry said tersely, turning to Fleur. “I know you can Apparate, so get home and don’t tell

anyone you saw me, avoid eye contact whenever you're thinking of me, and for god's sake burn any letters I send you after reading them. Can you do that, Fleur?"

Fleur took a deep breath. "I hope you know what you're doing, Harry."

"That makes two of us," Harry muttered, gripping Tonks' proffered arm tightly. A second later, there was a crack and all three of them Disapparated.

* * *

"Okay, listen up!" Reed Larshall shouted over the screaming din around him to his small squad of Hit Wizards. "We need some order here if we want to catch Potter before he escapes with his accomplice! Dwight, Ryans, Samuel, Lassion, you four form a cordon and barricade this section of the alley. Barkley, Anderson, and McArthur, you three search the buildings to the left of the crime scene. Cameron, you take the building on the right. Clyvis, you and your boys take care of the fires and search the wreckage for anything we can salvage before we have a larger inferno on our hands, and will somebody get a Patronus to Experimental Charms to get these explosives identified!"

"Sounds like you need backup," a smug voice said from behind Larshall. The heavy-set Hit Wizard took a steadying breath and turned to face Sanders, even as another group of Hit Wizards Apparated in behind him.

"Stop being a smartass, Sanders, I'm not in the mood for this," Larshall snarled. "I sent an emergency Patronus to MLE, and all they managed to bring is you?"

"I've got my men, and you're gonna need a lot more than four to hold back a cordon, especially when the Prophet starts swarming," Sanders snapped. "What the bloody hell happened here, anyways?"

"There was some sort of controlled explosive in Ollivander's. I was following Potter on Kemester's orders – got a tip that he'd been

sighted in the alley, so I followed him out of Fortescue's and was about to move in when this happened!" He gestured furiously at the flaming wreckage that used to be the wandmaker's shop. "He and his accomplice Disapparated before my Anti-Apparition jinx could settle over them, but chances are they couldn't have made it far."

"But why would he blow up the best wandmaker's shop in Britain?" Sanders asked incredulously. "That's just plain insane, Reed! The Prophet's going to have a field day with this! Do you have any definitive proof that it was Potter who blew it up?"

"That's why I'm trying to get those explosives identified!" Larshall shouted as a bang issued from one of the Hit Wizard's wands. "We're going to need more backup if we want to restore order here! Can you get a Patronus to Bones? I don't think I can muster the happy memory right now –"

CRACK.

"Reed, you'd better start talking, and you'd better start talking fast," Kemester growled, his voice getting louder with each second. "You can start by telling me how the bloody hell did Potter blow up Ollivander's!"

"Sir, it came out of nowhere, nobody could have seen it coming!" Larshall yelled back. "You think I could have foreseen Potter blowing up an entire shop to throw off my pursuit?"

"He flew into the slipstream of a Muggle aeroplane to throw off pursuit before!" Kemester snarled. "And why wasn't I notified on the first wave?"

"I could respond to that by asking why the hell you even sent Larshall after Potter anyways!" Sanders roared. "Scrimgeour closed the case file, Kemester!"

Kemester threw a murderous glare at Sanders before turning back to Larshall, struggling to contain his temper. "All right," he growled, "we don't have enough here to track Potter yet, but this attack came at a

fortunate time. Potter is planning to go back to school, and that means we can intercept him en route to Hogwarts, considering he likely considers the school Dumbledore's sanctuary."

"You're suggesting hitting the Hogwarts Express," Sanders said suspiciously.

"That and the platform at King's Cross, and if that doesn't work, taking him at Hogsmeade," Kemester replied icily. "But for now, we need to make sure we have enough solid evidence to get Potter arrested. I want an analysis of the debris, I want witness reports, I want anything and everything relating to Potter since he set foot in Diagon Alley!"

"We still don't have proof he was the one who blew up Ollivander's _"

Sanders didn't get a chance to get out another word before Kemester had seized him by the collar and slammed him bodily into a doorpost of a nearby bookshop. Larshall could only swallow hard at the look of seething fury on his superior's face.

"I've had enough," Kemester growled, his eyes blazing, "of your insolence, Sanders. You will follow my orders and get me my information. Go to Scrimgeour or Bones if you want, I don't care, but with a crime of this magnitude, Potter's going to pay. Is that clear?"

Sanders threw Kemester a disdainfully rebellious look, but he nodded. With a disgusted scowl, Kemester shoved Sanders away from the door and clenched both fists.

"Larshall, when the fires are out, you and I are going to search the debris." He slammed his fist into his palm. "I'm getting proof this time, and Potter's not getting away with this. Not if I have anything to say about it"

* * *

“Harry!” Sirius exclaimed, turning in his seat at the kitchen table, shoving the Prophet and his half-eaten breakfast aside. “You’re back early... what –”

But Harry wasn’t even listening – his gaze was focused on Lupin as he circled around the table towards him. “Professor, I need to talk to Sirius and Tonks alone – now.”

“But what –”

“Harry, you don’t need to do this,” Tonks said in a low voice.

“I need people I can trust,” Harry growled, “and considering I came within a bloody hair of –”

“You can tell Remus what happened, Harry,” Tonks said, an exasperated edge coming into her voice. “He’s going to hear about it anyways, especially considering how bad the hit was –”

Sirius went still. “A hit? What hit?”

“Tonks, I don’t think –”

“Dumbledore’s going to find out about it anyways,” Tonks interrupted tiredly, leaning against the wall as her hair shifted from pink to a deep purple, “and it’s better that they hear it from you.”

“What the hell happened?” Sirius demanded.

Harry took a deep breath. “Someone hit Ollivander’s. Blew up the shop.”

Both Sirius and Lupin were on their feet. “What?”

“Likely Death Eaters,” Harry replied, pressing both palms against the table, “but it’s not like anybody’s going to believe that.”

Sirius swore under his breath while Lupin drew his wand and muttered a few words. A second later, something silvery that looked

suspiciously like a Patronus zoomed out of Lupin's wand and streaked up the stairs.

"Who was that to?" Tonks asked warily.

"Dumbledore," Lupin replied haggardly, shock still etched across his face. "He needs to hear about this, at least before he hears it from the Prophet. So that's what the Death Eaters were preparing for..."

"And a damn good hit it was," Harry growled, as he dropped into a chair. "They probably kidnapped Ollivander before robbing the shop and setting the explosives. And the timing..." He shot a glance to Tonks, and he knew she understood. The timing was perfect... too perfect. Somebody must have tipped them off, but who?

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't get hurt," Sirius said, wiping his brow with relief. "I mean, Voldemort does consider –"

"Hang on a second," Lupin said sharply. "Harry, why were you in Diagon Alley today?"

Harry threw his godfather a furious look. Sirius blanched and nearly put his hand to his face, but at Tonks' glare, he lowered it.

Turning back to Lupin, Harry shrugged. "I was handling my shopping. Supplies for Hogwarts, new books, you know..."

"I thought Dumbledore said that Molly was going to be handling that," Lupin said suspiciously. "And you know better than anyone that without backup –"

"I was with Harry, Remus," Tonks replied tiredly. "I was also the one who got him out of there before the Ministry showed up."

"And why would they?" Lupin asked coolly, crossing his arms over his chest. "That doesn't seem logical –"

"Remus, since when is the Ministry of Magic logical?" Sirius replied exasperatedly. "Come on, you've seen the Prophet! You know what it

was probably like for Harry in there; it would have been absolute hell! Besides, given how well MLE jumps to conclusions, they probably would assume that Harry set off the explosives!”

Harry and Tonks exchanged glances. Closer on the mark than you think, Sirius, Harry thought uneasily, especially considering if Kemester’s there, they’ll be running on that premise for their investigation...

“Then why did you go in the first place, Harry?” Lupin asked, clearly not convinced. “I mean, you only put yourself in danger by going there... I mean, Molly could have handled the shopping, she wouldn’t have had a problem getting money for you and –”

“Nobody besides me is going to be touching the gold in my vault until I’m certain of its security,” Harry replied evenly, staring up at Lupin cautiously. “Or until I figure out why the Potter vaults were sealed.”

Lupin frowned. “Potter vaults? Harry, you’re not making any sense –”

“In fact,” Harry interrupted, getting to his feet, “I was planning on asking you about that, considering you were close friends with my father before he was killed –”

“They thought I was the spy, Harry, I wasn’t nearly as close to them as you might think –”

“Don’t give me that bullshit!” Harry snarled, slamming a fist on the table as he got to his feet. “Sirius was in prison, and Tonks was too young to know, but you, Professor... After all, the Ministry closed the Potter accounts, assets and gold, fourteen years ago. You would have been a young man at the time, and probably very well aware of anything that was happening with your best friend’s money, and given the power of the Potter family, it would have made the news. I’ve seen most the closure file, Professor, but it’s woefully incomplete. Now, do you want to fill in the details, or should I?”

Lupin was going pale now, and breathing fast. "I didn't take James' money, if that's what you're implying. I wouldn't do that."

"Oh, I know very well that you wouldn't do that," Harry replied grimly. "Hell, given the way that werewolves are treated in the Wizengamot, you would have been lucky to get legal counsel. Besides, you loved and trusted James like a brother. It's a damned pity you can't do the same for his son, though."

Lupin clenched both his fists, and for the first time in Harry's life, he could see the shadow of the wolf behind his former professor's eyes. "How dare you accuse me —"

"Professor, I'm getting tired of the fence-sitting, so let's be straight with this" Harry snarled, matching Lupin's glare in intensity. "Do you know why and how the Potter vaults were sealed?"

Lupin clenched his teeth. "I don't know everything."

"I'm not asking for everything, Professor," Harry spat. "I'm asking for some very basic details, which shouldn't be difficult to provide... unless you've been forbidden, that is?"

Lupin said nothing, his eyes still fixed on Harry. Sirius and Tonks exchanged shocked glances.

"Remus?" Sirius asked quietly. "Did Dumbledore —"

"It wasn't him this time," Lupin snapped. "Although I think he knows."

"He probably didn't want the problem on your hands, Harry —"

"Good logic, Tonks, but Dumbledore's dishonesty isn't the concern here," Harry growled. "I'm getting used to that."

"So is it my 'dishonesty' you're questioning?" Lupin asked scathingly. "I'm sure James would have appreciated that of you."

“Don’t drag his name into this,” Harry growled. “Who is ‘forbidding’ you from telling me the truth about this?”

“I had no choice, Harry,” Lupin said quietly.

“I’m sure,” Harry spat sarcastically. “Who was it?”

Lupin took a deep breath. “You threw him out of the house only a few days ago.”

* * *

“Although I appreciate your hospitality, Lucius, you must understand the great danger of this... encounter.”

“I’m completely aware,” Lucius Malfoy replied icily, drumming his fingers lightly on the desk as Severus Snape stared out the high-arched window at the edge of the office. A light drizzle was falling, and the window was etched with moisture, the only other light from a few candles lit on the walls.

“Then why did you call me?” Snape asked, his sallow voice echoing slightly as he turned back towards Malfoy. “I have no desire to be here, even despite our... cordiality.”

“You have somewhere to go?”

“I suspect Dumbledore is trying to keep an eye on me,” Snape replied evenly. “He has his hands full as it is, but I suspect he has been endeavoring to keep an eye on me. Of course, such an action takes his eye off of other things, as you well know.”

“The Dark Lord was quite pleased with the attack on Ollivander’s, and from Avery’s report, it sounds like it was a complete success.”

Snape cocked an eyebrow. “You have good information, Malfoy. Wasn’t that attack supposed to be executed a half hour ago?”

“Avery’s timing is getting better,” Malfoy replied smoothly. “After all, he’s none too eager to feel the Cruciatus for his failures. And the attack has reportedly had a surprising development.”

“Oh?”

“Potter was spotted not meters from the explosion.”

Snape gave a humourless chuckle. “What a coincidence. I doubt anybody could have predicted that. Unless, of course, the Dark Lord planned for Potter’s name to be further smeared.”

“It certainly plays into his hands, especially with the way Dmitri Kemester has been behaving,” Malfoy said with a smirk.

“Are you paying him off now?”

Malfoy did give a brief laugh then. “Hardly,” he replied. “Why would I waste my money? Kemester’s more than willing to track Potter and make his life hell – I have no need to interfere.”

“So should I assume your hands are clean, then?” Snape asked speculatively.

“None that involves you, Severus.”

“Then why, exactly, did you call me over here?” Snape asked sharply. “I’m not stupid, Malfoy – if you want something, out with it.”

Malfoy calmly folded his fingers as he looked at Severus from his chair behind the desk. “It’s about my son.”

Snape snorted. “I thought it would be about that.”

“You heard his assignment –”

“Of course I did,” Snape snapped, “and so did you. And you know that the Dark Lord has expressly forbidden me from interfering. He

also informed me that it would be likely you'd seek me over this, considering my proximity to Draco."

"The Dark Lord is wise," Malfoy said smoothly, "but I fear that my son does not yet fully comprehend his wisdom."

Snape crossed his arms over his chest. "Explain yourself."

"Draco is... dissatisfied with being relegated to a secondary position in his mission," Malfoy said slowly. "He feels it will harm his political power base within his house."

Snape was unmoved. "And?"

"He has a point. Even though he will be a prefect this year, he knows that the Dark Lord's favour is more of a bonus than any school position. He does not understand why he has been delegated to a subordinate role."

Snape snorted with disgust. "He should be grateful that he received any job from the Dark Lord at all."

"Agreed, but he wants command."

"It would not be in his best interests," Snape said slowly and clearly, turning back towards the window. "I cannot interfere, as you well know, but it would be wise on your part to inform Draco that his position is far better than that of Theodore Nott's."

Malfoy cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Do you know the type of mission that the Dark Lord gave those two?" Snape asked.

Malfoy nodded. "I do, Severus, but —"

"And do you remember the means in which he provided them in which to carry out said mission?" Snape continued, his tone becoming icy.

“Yes, but –”

“Then you should know by now, Malfoy, that your son has indeed found favour with the Dark Lord, despite his minor role. I would reserve my pity for Nott.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyebrows. “Why?”

“Because, in the end, Draco will be the one to take credit for the Dark Lord’s success, the one to take the reward when things are successful and to stand behind if the mission fails,” Snape replied smoothly. “Nott is a scapegoat, yet intelligent and ambitious enough to complete his task with expediency.”

He touched the window, tracing a line down the thin film of moisture. “Of course,” he continued idly, “completion is often as much of a curse as it is a blessing.”

* * *

“And you couldn’t recognize any of the faces, Harry?”

Harry shook his head adamantly. “No, Professor, I did not. The window wasn’t exactly clean, and I’m nearly positive that the Death Eaters inside were wearing masks. I wouldn’t have been able to recognize them even if I was closer.”

Dumbledore continued pacing around the table where Harry was sitting, his thick brows furrowed deeply with thought. “Do you believe that the Death Eaters consumed themselves in the blast? A suicide attack?”

“Voldemort doesn’t have the resources,” Mad-Eye Moody scoffed from his spot at the end of the table. “And he’s never done it before, even during the first war unless they were under the Imperius.”

“Desperation?” a stately-looking woman that Harry knew only as Emmeline Vance asked curiously. “He doesn’t exactly have a lot of resources.”

“He’s got the prophecy, and Voldemort’s smarter than that,” Sirius growled from his spot across from Harry. “Nah, I reckon if the Death Eaters died, it was intentional. He’s probably trying to cull his ranks down a bit, get rid of the chaff and fodder he doesn’t need or want – or who would betray him.”

“A good point, Sirius,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “And you did not see Ollivander anywhere, did you, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “Didn’t see him once.”

“What about wands in the window, or along the shelves? Did you see any missing?”

Harry frowned. “It happened really fast, Professor... I honestly don’t remember. The shop exploded after I took a few steps past the doorway, I didn’t really get a chance to see a lot of details inside before it went up in flames.”

“Was a Dark Mark launched?” Shacklebolt asked suddenly, his eyes flashing. “Did the Death Eaters mark their attack?”

“Nothing was reported,” Dumbledore replied, scratching his chin, “but that is not surprising, given Voldemort’s likely desire to lie low.”

“So what do we do now?” Lupin asked grimly, his eyes fixed on Harry, who was completely ignoring his former professor’s gaze.

“For now, I will attempt to reiterate to Fudge that the Death Eaters are indeed active and that Voldemort has returned. Unfortunately, given recent circumstances at the Ministry, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are keeping the entire situation under extremely tight security, with clearance only given to those chosen by Fudge himself.”

“And the odds are that you, Albus, won’t get clearance.” Elphias Doge remarked, his wheezy voice raspy, yet mixed with a mixture of amused disgust.

Dumbledore sighed. “Fudge does not trust me like he used to, Elphias, despite all my attempts to remedy the solution.”

He’s not the only one, Harry thought bitterly.

“And it does not help that my best Aurors are already assigned to HAIT, and will not be able to participate in this investigation either,” Dumbledore finished heavily. “And that means our sources of information will be precariously limited. Kingsley, if you could call in any favours...”

Kingsley gritted his teeth, but nodded once with agreement.

Dumbledore then turned to Harry. “Did you manage to procure all of your school supplies, Harry?”

Lupin must have told Dumbledore my story, probably after Sirius threw him out of here, Harry thought quickly, and considering that Lupin was even allowed back into Grimmauld Place doesn’t speak particularly well for how that friendship is going to last... He met Sirius’ hard-eyed gaze, and let out his breath.

“Yes, Professor,” he lied.

“Good,” Dumbledore replied. “Now Harry, I must ask you to remain here until you leave for Kings’ Cross. Voldemort has already shown himself willing to attack in broad daylight, and you would present a rich target.”

Harry slowly got to his feet. “I wasn’t even planning on leaving, Professor. May I be excused?”

“Go ahead, Harry, the meeting’s over,” Dumbledore replied kindly, but Harry was already climbing the stairs and heading towards the drawing room. When he opened the door, he not only saw Tonks,

pacing by the window, but Fred and George carefully examining the glass cabinets by the wall.

“Meeting’s over,” Harry said tightly, shutting the door and locking it behind him. “Tonks, what are –”

“Harry, they need to be here,” Tonks replied, her voice deadly serious. “Is Sirius on the way up?”

CRACK.

“I bloody swear, I’m going to kill Remus –”

“Sirius, get a grip,” Tonks snapped. “Look, I know neither of us is too happy with what he did, but reserve your anger for someone who deserves it. Remus was just doing what he thought was right by keeping quiet.”

“Don’t make excuses for him, Tonks, I knew I was right not to trust him with anything,” Harry growled darkly. “All this time... through all of third year, and I had meeting with him privately for months, and he didn’t say a goddamned thing –”

“Probably scared that Snape had the teeth to back up the blackmail he was using to Remus quiet, and given their proximity...” Tonks shrugged. “Hell, he would have been scared that Snape could have slipped him some nightshade in his Wolfsbane Potion... or worse, botch it altogether.”

“Well, when I get my hands on Snape, I’m going to make him explain himself before I slit his traitorous little throat –”

“Sirius, that’s enough,” Tonks replied worriedly, pulling out her wand and quickly muttering a few charms around the door.

“Besides, I want to be there to help when you do it,” Harry added darkly.

“We have bigger problems on our plate than Snape right now,” Tonks replied uneasily, throwing a quick glance at Fred and George, who were looking somewhat astonished by the dark looks on Sirius and Harry’s faces. “I got some new information from Magical Law Enforcement when I went in this afternoon – and it’s not good.”

“Kemester’s already involved, I’m guessing,” Harry said bitterly.

“Not explicitly,” Tonks replied carefully, “but most of the members of the task force worked with Kemester during the last investigation, and think that you’re the prime suspect. Worse, they’ve now got evidence to back it up. You were the closest person to Ollivander’s when it blew up, you were already trying to evade MLE pursuit when the explosion occurred, and you fled from the scene of the crime when confronted.”

“Blimey, Harry,” Fred said with astonishment, “you do get yourself in some sticky situations.”

“And it gets worse,” Tonks replied grimly. “They couldn’t find the person you were meeting – thankfully, I don’t think anybody got a clear enough look at her face during the encounter – but they did manage to identify the explosives used to blow up Ollivander’s.”

She turned to Fred and George. “The magical traces mostly match those found at Gringotts.”

Harry’s mouth fell open. “How... that’s impossible!”

“Our fireworks don’t even have that much firepower!” George protested. “We couldn’t blow up a building with them even if we tried!”

“Mind you, we haven’t tried,” Fred added, “but the fact remains the same.”

“You said ‘mostly’ match, Tonks,” Sirius said with a frown. “How different are they? How clear of a correlation can be drawn?”

“A pretty clear one, Sirius,” Tonks replied heavily. “Any impurities within the traces could be blamed on chemicals required to amplify the fireworks to be dangerous.”

“So the question now is how the Death Eaters got their hands on the chemicals to make the explosives,” Harry finished, clenching both his fists as he turned to the twins. “I heard from Ron that you’ve been running a mail order service out of the Prophet – sell any of those fireworks?”

“Not in the numbers they’d need to pull off a stunt like this,” George replied with a shake of his head.

“Besides, those fireworks were still primarily experimental anyways and not for sale yet,” Fred added. “We just wanted a trial run.”

“Then how did the Death Eaters synthesize a chemical so quickly?” Harry growled, putting a hand to his forehead to try and stem the headache already pounding there.

Fred frowned slightly. “Well, they’d need a high concentration of a similar solution –”

“And it would need to be super-concentrated to produce that kind of blast –”

“And perhaps if someone had access to the previous traces, a lot of equipment and materials, and was really good at breaking down and analyzing components, then I guess they might –”

“And note we say might – it took us a load of trial and error to get them even close –”

“ – They could be replicated,” Fred finished with a shrug. “It’s a possibility.”

“And not one that implies anything good for us,” Sirius finished. “There’s a leak in Magical Law Enforcement – somebody must have stolen a copy of the traces from the Gringotts explosion –”

“Probably in transit from Experimental Charms,” Tonks noted disgustedly, “when they were under less security.”

“And we’ve got another thing we can blame Snape for now,” Harry spat, “considering he’s probably the only one with enough expertise to synthesize an explosive from just traces. Just bloody perfect.”

“Did you manage to hear anything about what the investigation is planning on doing to get Harry?” Sirius asked, both hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

“Nothing that I could hear, but it’s pretty obvious what they can do,” Tonks replied bitterly. “There’s only one place where they can both confirm Harry’s location and take him before he reaches Hogwarts –”

“And that’s the train,” Harry snarled. “Damn it, I’ll be a sitting duck!”

“We can’t rely on the Order for help this time,” Tonks said worriedly, running a hand through her short hair. “Hell, some of them might suspect that Harry actually rigged all this, and if we asked for protection, they’d want to know why the investigation was after you the first place –”

“This is all running on the assumption, Harry, that you are not an arsonist,” Fred added brightly.

“Tends to be a good assumption to make,” Harry replied with a snort.

“That’s what you think,” George muttered.

“The point is that we need some way to protect or shield Harry while he’s on the train,” Sirius said, his tone a mixture of thoughtfulness and frustration. “But it’ll have to be something quiet – nothing to attract their attention...”

“A disguise?” Harry asked, cocking an eyebrow. “I don’t think I can hide under my Invisibility Cloak the entire trip, particularly if they’re searching the train.”

“But most Aurors have magic that can get through disguises!” Tonks replied with a frustrated huff. “And I don’t even know what the Hit Wizards are using these days...”

“Then it’ll have to be something new, improvised,” Harry said quickly, scratching his chin. “We don’t have a lot of time, but we could cobble something together. Tonks, you got top marks in Concealment and Disguise in Auror training, right?”

“Yes, but the Aurors will expect anything from their —”

“But you’ve got talents they don’t,” Harry interrupted, a crafty expression moving onto his face. “You’re a Metamorphmagus – how did you learn to use your talents anyways?”

Tonks frowned. “There were a few books, Harry, but most of that you won’t be able to use —”

“But there is some, right?” Harry asked persistently.

“They’d be back at my mother’s, but I could get them,” Tonks replied, her hair shifting colour with her confusion. “Harry, what’s this all about?”

But Harry was no longer listening. “I need to come up with something to throw the Aurors off – something new, a combination of magic that might just throw them off long enough. If there are any Metamorphmagus techniques or magic that I can use...”

“I could help here, Harry,” Sirius said suddenly.

“Sirius, it’s too dangerous —”

“Not even that,” Sirius replied, a grin growing on his face. “This house is one of the largest repositories of magic outside of Diagon Alley or one of the other old family manors. There might be something in my father’s room that could help us out, considering Narcissa stole the rest of the family library that wasn’t already purchased or ‘donated’ to Voldemort’s cause back in the First War.”

“You think there could be something?”

“My father didn’t sell or donate everything, I know that,” Sirius replied thoughtfully. “He kept some of the more powerful spellbooks and possibly some of his casting components, but you know some of this magic I’m talking about could very well be considered Dark magic.”

Harry blew out a short breath. “Well, the risk is only mine, really – and I’m willing to take it, if it works. What about you two?” he asked, turning to the twins. “Have any disguising or concealing magic?”

Fred and George exchanged a shifty glance.

“Possibly,” Fred replied.

“Although most of it is still on the drawing board or in the experimental stage, you realize,” George added.

“What he’s trying to say is that if we have anything,” Fred finished, “it would likely be unstable, and probably risky to test.”

“Will you be willing to give it to me?” Harry asked, taking a deep breath.

Fred and George exchanged another glance.

“Well, we do need a tester...”

“And we don’t need to pay him, which would certainly be a plus...”

“And he’s already willing...”

“Well?” Harry asked impatiently.

They both looked up and gave identical shrugs. “We’ll see what we can do,” Fred promised.

“But don’t rely on us to come up with anything big, Harry,” George added seriously. “Pressure’s not good for the creative process.”

“That’s all I needed,” Harry replied wearily. “Thanks.”

When the twins left the room, Tonks turned to Harry.

“You trust them?”

“What choice do I have?” Harry returned bitterly. “They’re intelligent and creative – they might come up with something.”

“That’s taking a big risk,” Sirius warned. “You’ve got to be careful here – we could be messing with some dangerous magic, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Believe me, Sirius, I know,” Harry muttered, his eyes clear, “but I’m getting to Hogwarts if it’s the last thing I do, and Krumpholtz’s not stopping me this time.”

Author's Notes: well, after a ton of work and a fair bit of editing, I've got the latest and so far longest chapter of Renegade Cause for you all. Yes, I know there are some unresolved issues, particularly regarding Snape and the Potter vaults, but it'll be explained later, don't worry. But until next time, read, review, and enjoy!

“Remus, we need to talk.”

The haggard werewolf paused, his hand on the doorknob. “What do you want, Kingsley? I’ve got things to –”

“Not now, you don’t,” Kingsley said in a low voice. Remus frowned – he caught the slightly strained note in Kingsley’s voice.

“Dumbledore needs me to –”

“This’ll only take a few minutes,” Kingsley said quickly, pulling open a door. Hastily muttering a few words and waving his wand, he stepped inside the spacious coatroom (magically expanded to hold dozens of cloaks and coats), pulling a startled Remus in right behind him.

“This must be important,” Remus said suspiciously.

“Of course it’s important. Hell, if you haven’t noticed that something’s up in Grimmauld Place, you’re not as smart as I thought, Remus,” Kingsley said grimly, closing the door of the coatroom, leaving them in semi-darkness.

“What’s this all about?” Remus asked slowly.

“Do you know what Sirius, Potter, and Tonks are up to?” Kingsley shot back, his tone razor-edged. “Sirius Apparates out of the room now after every meeting and the meetings in which Tonks does show up she’s tight-lipped. As for Potter –”

“He’s been spending all his time up in his room,” Remus said, frowning with confusion. “Sure, he’s more on edge now than usual, but –”

“Remus, let’s cut to the chase, shall we?” Kingsley said evenly, crossing his thick arms over his chest. “I’m not a stupid man, and I can tell when there’s obvious antagonism between two people. Something broke between you, Sirius, and Potter, and now they’ re up to something. Care to fill in the blanks?”

“That’s assuming a lot,” Remus warned. “After all, Sirius wouldn’t dare try something that would take him out of the house –”

“Really?”

Remus was about to retort, but he froze in mid-word. Would Sirius dare to leave Grimmauld Place in his current mood? Would he openly defy Dumbledore?

In a heartbeat, he thought, swallowing hard at the possible implications. Especially now.

“Those three are up to something,” Kingsley said darkly, pacing around the room, “and it worries me that I don’t know as much about it as I’d like. The investigation into what happened at Ollivander’s has been placed off-limits to everyone who isn’t certified for it, and even the few favours I’ve managed to call in haven’t helped either. What I did manage to find out disturbs me.” He lowered his voice. “Their prime suspect is Potter.”

Remus’ eyebrows shot up. “You’re kidding me. They honestly think Harry would do –”

“He was confronted at the scene of the crime, and he fled,” Kingsley growled. “And who did we hear about the attack from first?”

“You’re not implying –”

“I’m not implying anything,” Kingsley snapped. “I just think it’s damn suspicious that Potter coincidentally happened to be in Diagon Alley right in front of Ollivander’s at the time of the explosion. This is the second explosion in Diagon Alley in a month, and I would be foolish

not to think there's a connection. So, is there anything you're not telling me, Remus?"

Remus closed his eyes. "Kingsley... I, I can't say –"

"Can't say what?" Kingsley snarled. "Can't say that you suspect Potter was involved in both incidents? Can't say that you suspect that Tonks and Sirius have been circumspectly aiding him in whatever the hell he's doing? Can't say why your friendship with Sirius seemed to fall apart mysteriously around the time of the Gringotts incident, and now, only a few days after the Ollivander's explosion, you can't even look him in the eye? What are you hiding, Remus, that you don't want Dumbledore or I to know?"

"I... look, Kingsley, I don't know all the details –"

"I know you don't, because it's clear as glass that Potter doesn't trust you farther than he can see you," Kingsley said coolly. "Hell, the only person who might know more than you in this matter is Snape, and Merlin knows that he's not talking to anyone! What we do know is this: somebody tried very hard to keep me out of the loop between the Gringotts incident and Potter's trial, and now all hell has broken loose again – and somehow, Potter's connected to it." Kingsley took a step closer, his eyes blazing. "What I don't know is why. Why Potter, Tonks, and Sirius are so secretive. Why Potter was really in Diagon Alley that day. Why Potter seems to be searching for something, even after he was cleared, something with which he trusts very few. Do you know anything, Remus?"

Remus blew out a heavy breath. "Kingsley, I think he's after the Potter accounts."

Whatever Kingsley was expecting, that was not it. A look of confusion crossed his face, quickly replaced by skepticism. "What?"

"You heard me, the Potter accounts at Gringotts that were closed nearly fourteen years ago!" Remus replied heatedly. "I don't know how he found out, but he's already interrogated me once, and he

won't go to Dumbledore. I couldn't tell him anything, though - I've got too much at stake."

Kingsley cocked an eyebrow. "So that means you won't tell me anything, either?"

"I can't, Kingsley, he already threatened –"

"Who threatened?" Kingsley said sharply. "Forget the pronouns, who's threatening you?"

"He's not even involved directly – hell, I don't even know he knew to come to me –"

"A name, Remus," Kingsley growled.

"Snape." Remus turned away and rubbed his forehead, a dull flush creeping into his features. "He... blackmailed me."

"What would Severus Snape have on you?" Kingsley asked incredulously. "And why was he even involved –?"

"I can't say, Kingsley!" Remus snarled angrily. "Damn it, I wish I could, but I can't. It's... it's complicated. Dumbledore already knows."

"And he's letting Snape get away with blackmail?" Kingsley asked furiously.

"I don't think that's exactly it, considering Snape favours no side but his own," Remus murmured. "But that's not the point – Potter knows that Snape was involved, and so does Sirius."

"It's no wonder then that Snape doesn't want to come back here," Kingsley muttered. "So Potter's just looking for information, then?"

"Kingsley, I don't know," Remus snapped with frustration. "I would tell you if I did, but none of them trust me to let me onto what they're planning."

Kingsley groaned with exasperation. "And I can't exactly let on that I know anything, either... damn it, for once, I wish we only had Voldemort to worry about! The thing is, the best opportunity for Potter to be arrested by the Ministry is at either King's Cross or on the train itself, outside of Dumbledore's direct jurisdiction, and you can bet that if Kemester's involved in any way, they'll make their first move when the train's en route. On the one hand, I wouldn't mind having Potter hauled in, if only to clear up some of this mess, but on the other hand _"

"Dumbledore's already said that he wants Harry at Hogwarts," Remus finished, running a hand through his thinning hair. "Kingsley, maybe the best thing in this case is... is just not to interfere at all."

Kingsley's eyebrows shot up. "You're just going to let –"

"I'm saying we should let Harry make the first move," Remus said heavily. "Fact is we can't do anything that'll make the situation any better... so let's just avoid the situation entirely. We only interfere if we've got no other choice."

"We should tell Dumbledore."

"Odds are, Kingsley, he already knows."

Kingsley stared at Remus for a long few seconds before sighing. "This isn't just, Remus, you know that. If Harry was responsible for those explosions, and he's somehow breaking the law –"

"We don't have proof, Kingsley, and as long as you're a member of the Order, doing what you're doing, you're breaking the law too," Remus replied quietly.

Kingsley snorted. "Perhaps I am, but this hypocrisy is the credit vice pays to virtue. And it doesn't mean I like it."

* * *

“I bloody hate this,” Harry muttered, sliding another book away from him as he rubbed his eyes.

“Harry, if Dumbledore had his way, you’d be under full guard at all times, and the Ministry or Voldemort wouldn’t be able to touch you, and none of this would even be necessary,” Sirius replied tiredly from his position at the end of the table. “And believe me, I’d be the first on that team.”

“Then why isn’t Dumbledore and the Order –”

“We’re stretched too thin as it is, Harry,” Tonks said with a helpless shrug. “Honestly, it’s a bloody miracle that I’ve managed to get as much time off as I have to help you with this crazy plan. And besides, did you really want to go to Dumbledore and ask him for a shortcut to Hogwarts?”

“I’m starting to wish I could,” Harry replied heavily. “Honestly, I am. Even if I’d have to explain some of the things I’ve done, he’d have to reciprocate. The only reason why I’m not doing things that way is –”

“Because you don’t trust him,” Tonks finished. “You still don’t trust Dumbledore. Harry, he’d support you – hell, he could probably get you a private Portkey to Hogwarts if you asked him –”

“Except that I can’t ask him,” Harry said flatly, “and I won’t.”

“And you forgot, Tonks, what Dumbledore himself mentioned about the possibility of the Ministry spying on him,” Sirius added. “Plus, considering Umbridge is planning on being at the school early –”

“All right, all right, I get the point,” Tonks cut him off, glaring at Sirius. “Why don’t you... oh, I don’t know, go get the twins up here? Harry’s leaving tomorrow; surely they’ve got something by now. It’s not like we have much more time.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, but he still got up and left the room, carefully shutting the door behind him.

“Any luck there, Tonks?” Harry asked, shoving aside another book that Sirius had managed to find in Orion Black’s room.

Tonks sighed as she rubbed her eyes. “Harry, most of these books that my mum gave me are only applicable if you have Metamorphmagus talent, and you don’t. There’s not going to be much – if anything – that we can use out of here.”

“Figures,” Harry grumbled. “But why bother to even write the damned books if they can only be used by Metamorphmagi? You told me there aren’t a lot of them.”

Tonks grinned. “Harry, there aren’t a lot of books available about Metamorphmagi talents at all. Most of these were stolen by my mum when she left home to marry my dad. There’s some evidence that the traits are hereditary, so the Blacks had a few books, but not many.” Her grin suddenly turned to a grimace. “Besides, Metamorphmagi have a really bad reputation in the wizarding world.”

“Why?” Harry asked curiously. “I mean, I’ve never heard anything about –”

“You wouldn’t have, Harry,” Tonks replied, her scowl deepening. “I’ve already told you that Metamorphmagi are really rare, but it didn’t stop people from being prejudiced against them.” She snorted. “In a way, it actually made more sense than any blood prejudice.”

“I can hardly see –”

“Harry, when Metamorphmagi first started appearing in the twelfth century – or at least that’s when I think they started appearing, a lot of that information’s murky – people were scared. Really scared, actually. Impersonation’s a powerful tool, and a Metamorphmagus, who can take anybody’s form at will, is a very dangerous person indeed.” She sighed as her hair went from bright pink to a rather sodden aquamarine. “So the early wizards killed off all the male Metamorphmagi and... sequestered the females.”

Harry winced. "Something tells me you're not telling me all the details about this."

Tonks gave Harry a bitter smile. "Well, sequestration sounds a lot better than locked in exclusive brothels under the Imperius Curse, doesn't it?"

Harry swallowed hard. "I thought using that curse was illegal."

"Well, that's political maneuvering for you," Tonks replied with another snort. "Leaders were scared to death of being impersonated, so they wrote a nice little loophole into their laws that allowed it, only in this case. In any case, that little bit of legislation regarding Metamorphmagi remained on the books until it was repealed just over fifty years ago. Can you guess who took it off the books, who told all the rich politicians and purebloods that had access to their little 'private establishments' that what they were doing was wrong?"

Harry's eyes widened. "Dumbledore." Of course, it's starting to make sense now! No wonder she wants me to trust Dumbledore...

"Right in one. Of course, the Wizengamot only pulled the legislation because Grindelwald had freed a few Metamorphmagi and was using them to infiltrate governments, and Dumbledore needed a way to ensure that we'd be on his side instead of Grindelwald's," Tonks finished heavily. "It's an unpleasant story, Harry, and one that the Ministry would like to forget. But this entire mess means is that there's very little actual Metamorphmagus literature, and what little there is written from an exclusively pureblood perspective." She wrinkled her nose. "It gets a bit disgusting at times –"

"Have any more luck?" Sirius asked, a hopeful smile on his face as he stepped into the room, the twins right behind him. Harry didn't like the looks on Fred and George's faces. They must not have had a lot of success...

Tonks shook her head with exasperation. "I'm honestly not getting anywhere with this," she said with disgust as she shoved the book to the side. "What about you two?"

Fred slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out a very small, very dark object, which he slowly set on the table. Harry frowned as he looked at it carefully, before looking up at the twins.

“A rock,” he said finally with a trace of disappointment in his voice. “As a weapon, I think it might have been done before.”

“It’s very well polished, though,” Tonks noted, as she picked it up. “Kind of pretty too...”

“But how is it going to help, Fred?” Harry asked sharply. “This isn’t concealing magic.”

“Not exactly,” Fred conceded, his expression suddenly becoming crafty.

“I think it might be a bit better,” added George. “Of course, that depends on what you might have found here.”

“You see, this rock is a very special rock,” Fred said, taking the rock from Tonks and setting it back on the table. “It’s enchanted to radiate a field in a certain, somewhat predefined radius.”

“What kind of field?” Sirius asked, sitting down at the table with an intrigued expression on his face.

“That’s just it, we haven’t decided yet,” George said with a hint of a smile. “Light, heat, magic, you name it, with the right configuration and enough power, this rock will emit it.”

“The trick that George and I have been working on is both choosing the right spell and working on the size of the field,” Fred continued, drawing his wand carefully. “We were considering putting an Invisibility Spell in it and putting it on a hat —”

“Headless Hats, anyone?” George suggested with a growing smirk on his face. “Problem is, a spell like that wouldn’t help you, and

probably wouldn't last long enough either to be of use. And neither of us has found a good Invisibility Charm –"

"We were planning on combing the Hogwarts library in a fervor unparalleled even by your friend Hermione –"

"So we're thinking you might have been able to find a better spell to cast into the rock," George finished. "Any ideas?"

Tonks ran a hand through her hair. "That's... that's actually really interesting. You could have a real market for those things."

"The problem is that I don't think we've managed to find any disguise charms that would make sense cast into that stone," Harry said intensely, flipping open the nearest book and flipping through the pages. "And considering those rocks only holds one spell at a time –"

"Aha!" Sirius exclaimed, pushing down the page in the book he was perusing, a rare smile on his face. "I knew there was something here: the Visual Expectations Charm, a nifty little spell that fell out of fashion a good hundred and fifty years ago when the Disillusionment Charm was created. Used to be all the rage among thieves and plunderers alike."

"No surprise it's in a Black spellbook, then," Tonks said wryly, moving next to Sirius with Harry. "Strange, I've never seen it before..."

"Probably because the Disillusionment Charm is simply better in the majority of circumstances," Sirius replied with a shrug. "This little spell, according to the book, allows the caster to 'blend in' with his surroundings, using preferences of the person and the characteristics of the surroundings to create the desired illusion. Problem was, the caster had to be completely stationary for the duration of the spell, otherwise the illusion would break apart." He looked at the stone on the table, a grin spreading across his face. "But if we cast this charm directly into the rock, Harry could carry the field around with him –"

“And that would make me effectively disguised,” Harry finished, a grin creeping across his own face as he closely scanned the text. “Tonks, do you think you could cast the spell into the stone?”

“Just a second, we can’t rush into this,” Tonks replied warily as she scanned the text. “The spell’s got a maximum duration here of only four hours, and I’m sure that it’ll put more pressure on the illusion if the field is moving. But I might know a way to at least extend the charm’s life for a few more hours...” Picking up one of the discarded spellbooks, she began leafing through it frantically.

“And then there’s the problem of the illusion itself,” Sirius said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “The last thing we need is for the illusion to fail midway between King’s Cross and Hogwarts. Harry, you might still have to wear a disguise, even just to keep the illusion intact –”

Harry groaned. “We don’t have time to put together a full –”

“It would at least give you something if you’re approached by anyone,” Fred said fairly. “Doesn’t Malfoy make a point of finding you every time you’ve gone on the train? If you’re in disguise, you can hide in plain sight and let the charm do the rest.”

“And I’m sure that you could come up with a disguise quickly enough,” George finished. “And if you can’t, I’m sure Fred and I could come with something for you –”

But a grin was already spreading across Sirius’ face. “Hey Tonks, in the persona file that we worked up for your ‘Nymphadora Vuneren’ alias, didn’t we say she had a younger sibling?”

“Yeah, a sister, about seventeen, homeschooled at the Vuneren manor,” Tonks replied distractedly. “Likely would be a Ravenclaw if sorted...”

Her voice trailed off as she looked up to see the identical evil grins on the twins’ faces, and Harry’s horror-stricken expression.

“No,” Harry said firmly. “Absolutely bloody not.”

“Oh come on, Harry, think about it for a second!” Fred said exasperatedly. “Nobody would suspect you disguising yourself as a girl!”

“No shit, because I’m not going to!” Harry replied heatedly.

“Harry, it’s a perfect bluff, and you already have an alibi,” Sirius said, fighting to keep the smile off his face. “Tonks and I can help you with some minor charms and transfigurations – any major transfigurations could be very dangerous – and we can let Fred and George’s rock do the rest. And besides, it’s a great cover – who would bother a quiet Ravenclaw seventh year, sitting by herself as she studies? Answer – nobody. The house is pretty reclusive, Harry – nobody would even question it.”

“But does it have to be a girl?” Harry asked with frustration. “I’m not a bloody fairy, for Merlin’s sake!”

“He’s in denial,” George said in a stage whisper.

“I know a good therapist who might be able to help him,” Fred replied seriously. “These sorts of issues require professional help –”

“Fuck you both,” Harry muttered vehemently. “Is there another way?”

“Harry, it’s only a disguise, and Sirius and I can use spells so that nobody will know the difference,” Tonks said, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “It won’t be perfect, but Fred and George’s stone will compensate for everything we miss. And nobody will know it’s you.”

Harry blew out a long breath. “Fine, but if possible, I want all the spells to wear off at the same time – I don’t want to be looking like a freak for the Welcoming Feast. And this stays between us – nobody else needs to know anything about this, got it?”

Tonks nodded. "Make sure you're up and awake before anyone else is tomorrow morning – earlier than six if possible. I dropped by Diagon Alley to get your books – that came to sixteen Sickles, twenty-six Knuts, which I'll be wanting, by the way – and I left them in your room. Make sure that you have all your things put together tonight – we'll have a very limited time window if we want to pull this off. You'll be ready?"

"Don't expect any problems from me," Harry said with a weak smile as he quickly left the room, Fred and George behind him.

"Who else are we supposed to expect problems from?" Sirius muttered, "if not him?"

"Kemester," Tonks growled. "I'll bet you ten-to-one he'll make a move tomorrow – knowing him, he'll probably try and hit the train en route, even though he's not on the investigation. Even despite everything we're doing, there's still a chance Harry's disguise won't hold up."

"Not to mention the fact that Voldemort could try something," Sirius added thoughtfully.

"I doubt it – he probably doesn't want to expose himself this early..." Tonks swore as she slammed her hand on the table. "I just have a bad feeling that this won't be enough, and we don't know how effective the twins' stone will be. Harry's going to need backup this time – a way out if the Hit Wizards begin using aggressive tactics or his cover is blown."

"Are you suggesting a disguise for yourself too?" Sirius asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's already planned – partially," Tonks muttered, pulling a scrap of paper out from under one of the books. "I've already spoken to my superiors about having a day off tomorrow, so nobody will miss me as long as I report in at the Welcoming Feast, and I took care of as many HAIT members that I could reach who could make things difficult. I'll

use the Vuneren cover when escorting Harry to Hogwarts, it'll strengthen his disguise, particularly if he's spotted. But that doesn't get me on the train..."

"I got it," Sirius said suddenly, his eyes lighting up.

"Got what?"

"A way you can extract Harry if everything goes to pieces! Nobody will see it coming, and your cover will remain intact."

"I'm all ears," Tonks said cautiously. Her eyes widened as Sirius told her his plan. Finally, when he was finished, she shook her head adamantly. "You're out of your mind, Sirius. If Dumbledore –"

"Who says he needs to know?" Sirius interrupted slyly. "Just go to Hagrid and get what you need from him, and make sure you notify Harry with one of those mirrors."

"You can't be serious," Tonks protested. "I'm all for crazy plans, Sirius, but that really takes the cake. It's a bloody suicide mission, for both of us!"

"So I'm assuming you're doing it?" Sirius asked, a wry smile spreading across his face.

"What other choice do I have?" Tonks shot back sharply. "It's a good plan – provided it doesn't get us both killed. And you know I'm not going to get any sleep tonight?"

Sirius clapped her on the shoulder. "Blacks don't need sleep, Tonks. Guess you're becoming more like us after all."

* * *

Ron awoke to the sound of shouting, echoing up the narrow staircase towards his locked door...

He frowned and rubbed his eyes. The door wasn't locked – not the way he and Harry had left it the night before. That's bloody strange... "Harry, did you leave the door unlocked?" he grumbled, rolling over towards Harry's bed.

A bed that was neatly made – and unoccupied.

Ron sat bolt upright and looked quickly around the room, hastily pushing the hair out of his eyes. Harry's trunk is gone too... where did he go? Was he kidnapped or something –

Scrambling out of bed, he pulled open the door and quickly descended to the kitchen... where his mother was screaming her lungs out at Fred and George, who were only looking passably guilty.

"YOU COULD HAVE DEALT HER A SERIOUS INJURY, YOU IDIOTS –"

"Ron!" Fred exclaimed, spotting his younger brother at the base of the staircase. "Bloody fantastic to see you this fine morning –"

"Fred, Harry's gone!" Ron interrupted as he struggled to control his breathing.

Mrs. Weasley stopped shouting instantly, and the silence in the kitchen was deafening. Lupin, who had been slicing bread by the counter, nearly dropped the knife in his hand.

"What do you mean, gone, Ronald?" Mrs. Weasley asked in a dangerous voice. "Was he –"

"All his stuff too. His bed was made, his trunk was packed, everything was gone," Ron said quickly, an edge of panic in his voice. "I dunno what happened to him – could he have been abducted or –"

"Ron, there's nothing to worry about," Sirius said easily, folding his newspaper as he took a sip of his tea. "Tonks and Harry just went early to King's Cross to throw off any Death Eaters that might try and make sudden moves."

“Did they really?” Lupin asked, a bland note of curiosity in his voice. “That’s funny, I didn’t see them.”

Fred and George exchanged smirks, but only Ron seemed to notice.

“It was really early,” Sirius said with a grimace, holding back a yawn. “In any case, it’s nothing to worry about, Remus – everything’s under control.”

“Harry was supposed to under guard to King’s Cross with all of us!” Mrs. Weasley said sharply. “Why weren’t any of us informed of the change in plans –”

“Can’t tell you that,” Sirius replied breezily, turning back to his paper. “Top secret. Little bit of a gambit, really. A tactical bluff, if you will.”

“Does Dumbledore know about this?” Mrs. Weasley asked, her eyes narrowing.

Sirius looked up and shrugged, a small grin on his face. “Molly, what doesn’t he know?”

Lupin visibly tensed at Sirius’ remark, but Mrs. Weasley relaxed with relief. “All right, then,” she said, turning back to the twins. “Next time, you two be careful when you’re bringing your trunks down! There’s no need to nearly kill Ginny by sending them hurtling down the stairs –”

“Right-o, Mum,” George replied brightly, putting his hand on Ron’s shoulder and steering him towards the door. “Don’t mind us – we’ll keep ourselves and Ronniekins out the way until we’re all fully packed and ready.”

“What is going on?” Ron hissed the second they were out of his mother’s vision. “Where’s Harry –”

Fred and George’s faces both turned grim. “Trust us, Ron, it’s better you don’t know,” Fred said in a low voice.

“Operational security and all that,” George added.

“Are you two involved? I mean, did he get you –”

“Quit sputtering, Ron, or it’ll turn into a habit,” Fred advised. “Now go get your prefect badge, find Hermione, and don’t go looking for Harry until you get to Hogwarts, all right? He’ll be safer that way.”

“But what’s going on?” Ron asked wildly. “Does he still not trust me enough to tell...”

His voice trailed off as Fred and George exchanged wary glances.

“Well, let’s put it this way,” Fred said carefully. “Harry’s encountered a bit of trouble, and he asked for our help.”

“Smart man,” George added, a small grin crossing his face. “He goes straight to the professionals.”

And with that, they continued up the stairs, leaving an utterly bewildered Ron standing in the stairwell.

* * *

Luna Lovegood always preferred arriving early at King’s Cross if she could help it. Of course, she couldn’t always help it – her father’s work always made it a tad difficult getting things put together in the morning. But she preferred it. That way, she could always find a nice compartment not already infested by Wrackspurts and other peculiar creatures... not to mention other students. The train always has a dreadful infestation of those beings, she thought concernedly as she pulled her trunk behind her through the nearly deserted train, peeking into each compartment in turn. They should really get somebody to contain them... I know Dad has spoken about the problem on many occasions...

She frowned slightly as she peeked into another compartment. Hmm... they should bring in somebody to take care of those white stains in the seat cushions. They don’t want to attract Sacarbi onto

the train – once those poor creatures start nesting, they're very difficult to remove...

Tucking her blonde hair behind her wand (which was precariously balanced behind her ear), Luna looked into another compartment to see a very strange sight. That's very odd – the compartment's nearly Wrackspurt-free... and I thought Dad said that even the Ministry couldn't effectively get rid of them... all the same, I can't pass up on the opportunity...

She slid the compartment door open and heaved in her trunk – only to see that the compartment was already occupied. A single student, a pretty girl with strawberry-blonde hair and a slightly nervous expression, was sitting by the window, a book open on her lap and a small, rather battered mirror sitting beside her.

"I'm sorry," the girl asked quickly, "are you I-looking for something?"

Luna gestured at the empty seat. "I'd like to sit here, if you wouldn't mind." She lowered her voice as her eyes brightened. "Everywhere else has Wrackspurts – I don't think I've ever seen an infestation on the train this bad before..."

"Er... right," the girl replied, confusion replacing the panic on her face. A very good sign, Luna noted to herself. If she's not afraid of the Wrackspurts, there's less of a chance she'll attract them over here.

After Luna had settled down, she noticed the other girl was staring at her. Luna paid her no mind as she pulled her copy of the Quibbler from the top of her trunk. After all, it's fun to feel a bit confused – best to let her enjoy it while she still can.

The other girl finally closed her book. "Sorry to interrupt," she slowly began, "but, uh, I don't know who you are. You're here awfully early."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Luna replied happily, smiling as she met the girl's bright green eyes. I think I might have seen those eyes before somewhere... didn't Dad once say that Heliopaths have green eyes, to contrast with their flaming nature? But that would mean I must

have seen a Heliopath and forgotten about it... “I’m Luna, Luna Lovegood. And I don’t know who you are.”

The girl blushed. “I’m sorry... I’m Isabelle Vuneren. I’m new here.”

Luna frowned. “You are here, right? Not a Sacarbi in disguise? My dad just told me about those... I didn’t think there were any white stains in here...”

The confusion returned to the girl’s face. “N-no, I’m here, why wouldn’t I be? And what’s a Sacarbi?”

“If you don’t know, you don’t want to know,” Luna advised her in a near-whisper. “I’ll just assume you’re actually here, okay? A hallucination is occasionally interesting, but I want to finish the magazine Dad gave me.”

“That, uh, seems like a good assumption,” Isabelle replied awkwardly. “You’re a Ravenclaw, right?”

“Wit beyond measure is man’s best treasure,” Luna recited to herself, a small smile on her lips as she peeked out the window.

“That’s a ‘yes,’ right?” Isabelle asked cautiously.

“I think so,” Luna replied serenely. “Never can be sure, there’s always that uncertainty principle hanging about.”

“Uncertainty principle?”

“I thought everyone knew about it,” Luna said, a serious look in her eyes. “A great Muggle scientist named Hindenburg came up with it about sixty years ago. Brilliant man – society never gives him enough credit.”

The look of confusion was back on Isabelle’s face, and Luna nodded with certainty as she turned back to her magazine, happy that she made a new friend.

* * *

“All right!” Reed Larshall shouted to the assembled group of Hit Wizards standing in front of him. “This mission is of extremely high priority, and will require a great deal of precision to complete correctly. If any part of this mission is botched by any of your incompetence, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“And what if it’s your incompetence?” a dark-haired, smirking fellow named Roger Lassion shouted from the back of the briefing room.

“Then I’ll be paying dues to the devil, not you,” Larshall returned, as a few sparse chuckles broke out. “In any case, most of you already know our role in this mission. After the first wave stops the train, we move in after it begins moving. Identification of the right car is absolutely critical – we want to avoid any collateral damage, considering the number of innocent students on that train. Once we capture him, we proceed directly to our rendezvous point. If he manages to elude us, this becomes HAIT’s problem, not ours. Hopefully, he’ll come quietly without a huge fuss.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Boyd Clyvis, a hard-bitten veteran from the First War shouted. “What then?”

“We give chase, but break off immediately if the situation becomes dangerous. We’ve already lost people chasing this suspect before,” Larshall said, fighting back the catch in his throat. “We’re not losing any more. Clear?”

There was a grunt of assent, and Larshall gestured towards the doors. “To your brooms, people.”

The room broke into a familiar din as the Hit Wizards moved for the exits. Larshall turned to tuck the few papers he brought with him into his bag, only to see Dmitri Kemester leaning against the wall in the back of the briefing room, a grim look on his face.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Larshall said hurriedly, a cold sweat going down his back as he gestured towards the doors. “If Bones finds out —”

“I’ve got leave to be here,” Kemester replied coolly, pulling open the back door and following Larshall through it. “It’s a briefing, come on — am I so disgraced that I’m not allowed in those anymore?”

“This is a covert investigation, just the same,” Larshall replied tensely, his eyes sweeping the hallway as he walked. “You shouldn’t have listened in.”

“I knew something seemed off about that,” Kemester said suddenly, snapping his fingers. “Why the hell are you in charge of the investigation? I thought you were going to be joining me with HAIT?”

“Change of plans,” Larshall replied with a disgusted scowl. “Orders were placed that I was to be transferred out and placed in charge over here. I don’t exactly mind.”

“Well, I do!” Kemester snarled. “Who the hell did they replace you with?”

Larshall closed his eyes, preparing for the inevitable explosion. “Sanders.”

“Sanders?” Kemester’s voice was as incredulous as it was angry. “The guy’s lazy as fuck and imbecilic to boot! I need somebody competent backing me up at Hogwarts!”

“Glad to know you’ve got such a high opinion of me,” a new voice hissed from the edge of the hallway. Larshall winced as Sanders came into view, glaring at Kemester with undisguised enmity. “And you better cooperate with me or we’re going to have serious problems when you get to Hogwarts —”

“And when I care what you think, I’ll ask for it,” Kemester snapped.

“I assume you have a really good reason why you were at the briefing without clearance,” Sanders growled. “I saw you leave the room.”

Kemester’s eyes narrowed as he pulled out two, official-looking pieces of paper. “I got you your warrant, Larshall. Your mission plan’s a go.”

Finally, Larshall thought with relief, but Sanders snatched the paper before Larshall could even move.

“How on earth did you get this, Kemester? You’re in disgrace –”

“Doesn’t mean that if you know the right people, things can’t get done,” Kemester cut him off icily. “The warrant you’ve got, Larshall, is for hitting the train en route. This one’s for Hogsmeade Station, intercepting that filthy fugitive before he gets inside the gates of Hogwarts. We can’t let him get under Dumbledore’s safety blanket – none of those warrants are binding in Hogwarts without the approval of the school governors, and I couldn’t get that.”

“And who did you bribe to get these?” Sanders spat, unable to hold back the note of raw jealousy. “Because there’s no way –”

“The seal’s authentic, isn’t it?” Kemester said with a snort as he yanked the paper out of Sanders’ hand and passed it to Larshall. “And as a matter of fact, my contact was more than willing to supply me with the warrants.” His cold smile had no warmth as he tucked the second warrant back into his pocket. “At least someone around here understands that justice must be meted.”

“We’ll get him,” Larshall said calmly. “Don’t worry, Dmitri, Potter’s not getting away from me again.”

There was the sound of hammering footsteps, and a hurried salute from one of the junior Hit Wizards. “Sir, the teams are ready.”

“Good,” Larshall replied, taking a deep breath. It’s time. “Signal the first wave to begin. As soon as they do their job, we’ll take him down.”

* * *

“Anything off the trolley, girls?” the stout old woman asked, peeking into the compartment.

“No thanks,” Harry replied quickly, unnerved by the sound of a high-pitched voice coming out of this throat. It might have been good charmwork, Tonks, and it might have been essential for my disguise, but you’re still going to pay for this.

“What about you, dearie?” the woman kindly asked Luna, who looked up from her magazine with a slightly perplexed look on her face.

“I still don’t understand how you can mistreat frogs so badly as to turn them into chocolate,” Luna said, a hurt edge creeping into her voice. “It’s very cruel, you know.”

The trolley woman sighed and shook her head as she began to close the door. “You know that they aren’t real frogs, my dear?”

“Not anymore, they’re not,” Luna replied sadly. “It’s a real tragedy, it is. My father wrote all about it in the Quibbler a year ago, didn’t you read about it?”

The woman shook her head again. “Dearie, the Quibbler is a bunch of fairy tales. It’s not true.”

“Excuse me?” Luna said, her voice suddenly sharpening. “My father’s the editor.”

That explains a lot, Harry thought, confusion and pity mingling in his mind. Poor girl just doesn’t know the truth about things... she must get teased like something awful at Hogwarts...

He carefully raised the small mirror on the seat up to his face. “Tonks?” he whispered. “Anything new, yet?”

“Something’s up, but we already knew that,” Tonks said, her voice barely audible from the glass. “The entire Hit Wizard section in MLE has been sealed off, according to a friend of mine over there. They’re really trying to keep this covert...”

“All right, keep me posted then,” Harry muttered, hurriedly placing the mirror into his pocket. He reopened his book and tried to concentrate on the words, but it was difficult without his glasses. I know why Tonks wanted me to take them off, but it’s still bloody frustrating...

“You must have a very nice reflection,” Luna said suddenly, the distracted note in her voice completely unnerving Harry.

“Excuse me?”

“Your reflection actually talks to you,” Luna said with a wistful smile. “I wish my reflection was that friendly – I bet she’d have loads to talk about, too.”

Harry went red. “It’s a magic mirror, Luna. My reflection isn’t exactly talking to me –”

He froze. That’s strange, it feels like the train is slowing down, but we aren’t anywhere close to Hogwarts yet... something must be up...

“We’re at Hogwarts already?” Luna asked curiously, closing her magazine with a frown as the lights in the compartment began to flicker. “I didn’t know somebody had upgraded the train...”

“We might have broken down,” Harry murmured, looking out the window, a strange sensation of nervousness and fear taking hold in the pit of his stomach. “Can’t see a thing with all this fog either...”

Then he felt it – the bone-numbing, clammy chill that seemed to seep through every cranny of the compartment. He recognized it in a second – he had already felt it once this summer – and his heart began to hammer with panic. “Oh no, oh fuck,” he whispered. “It can’t be... not now...”

He drew his wand and picked up his mirror. "Tonks, get over here," he whispered quickly. "Now. I've got company, and I'll blow my cover if I fend it off –"

"That's strange," Luna said as she peered out the window. "There are men on brooms outside – a lot of them. I wonder what they're looking for."

"The same thing the Dementors are looking for," Harry said tightly, taking Luna's arm and holding her to the back of the compartment. "And they're already here."

The lights in the compartment died entirely, and Harry gritted his teeth as he pointed his wand towards the door. "Luna, when the door opens, concentrate on the happiest thing you can think of and say 'Expecto Patronum,' okay? It's a charm that should make the Dementors leave, all right?"

Luna nodded as Harry quickly yanked the curtains across the window, plunging the compartment into darkness.

"Why did you do that?" Luna asked, her voice remarkably calm as Harry lit his wand with a muttered word.

"Dementors don't like sunlight, and we want to make them as comfortable as possible before we invite them in," Harry replied steadily, pointing his own wand at the compartment door. And any silver-white flashes will immediately alert the Hit Wizards that something's up. "After all, we wouldn't want to make the Dementor feel uncomfortable."

Luna gave him a funny look. "I think you might be a bit strange, Isabelle. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Harry was about to utter a response, but at that second, the door slid open, pulled open by a rotting, scabrous hand.

* * *

“Sir, all of the Dementors have entered the train,” a younger Hit Wizard shouted to Larshall. “What are your orders?”

Larshall cleared his throat and adjusted his grip on the broom. “As soon as the spotters find the car that Potter’s in, we withdraw the Dementors, wait until the train is in motion, and then move in. We surround Potter and take him down. He’s got no way out this time.”

A few tense minutes passed. Larshall frowned as he flew in towards the train, scanning the long line of cars, so close that he could feel the Dementor’s chill in the surrounding air. That’s strange, none of the spotters have signaled anything, but Potter would surely defend himself against a Dementor... this is taking too long, something’s gone wrong...

He soared back up to where the Hit Wizards were hovering. “Any word from the spotters?”

“Nothing, sir,” Dwight said apologetically. “No sign of a silver-white flash or flicker. Look, the Dementors are starting to leave –”

Larshall gritted his teeth. “Lassion, Clyvis, come with me on a pass of the train –”

“Sir, I think I might have identified the cab!” McArthur shouted. “Had a compartment with curtains drawn... it’s got to Potter!”

“And no other compartment would draw their curtains?” Larshall yelled. There was a blast of steam and a shrill whistle – the Hogwarts Express was starting to move.

“With Dementors on the train?” McArthur shouted. “They’d want as much light as possible – even with the fog, there’s no reason to draw the curtains unless they’re –”

“Hiding something,” Larshall finished, his voice already getting hoarse. “All right, which car is it?”

“Second cab from the back, sir!”

Larshall let out a shrill whistle and pointed towards the accelerating car. “Move in, people! Potter’s ours!”

* * *

Harry was breathing very fast as he slowly lowered his wand. Luna’s wand was also drawn, but her eyes were more focused on the door of the compartment than Harry – something for which he was very grateful.

He pulled out the slightly smoking rock in his pocket and swore quietly. The Patronus Charm he had finally cast had driven the Dementor back, but the sudden eruption of magic from his wand had distorted the illusion irreparably. The second the Dementor had withdrawn, there had been a peculiar sucking sound like that of his aunt’s vacuum, and the image of Isabelle had lifted along with Tonks’ charms on his clothes and body, all of which she had linked to the stone. Now only Harry Potter was standing in the compartment – and there was nowhere left to run.

He knew he only had precious seconds before the Hit Wizards were coming. “Luna, make sure my trunk gets off the train, if you can, I’ve got to run.” Wrenching open his trunk, he grabbed his Firebolt and Invisibility Cloak (both of which Sirius suggested he leave on top) and cautiously moved towards the aisle.

“All right, Isabelle,” Luna replied serenely, letting out the breath she had been holding as she sat down and picked up her magazine. “Nice disguise, by the way.”

Harry shook his head as he cautiously stepped out into the corridor. Frightened students were already coming out into the corridor... and at the front of the cab, he could hear shouting.

He made his decision in a second. Keeping his wand high, he began shoving his way towards the rear of the train car. If he could get to the

rear of the train and signal Tonks, he might have a chance... or at least a place where he could make a stand...

“Harry, what the –”

“Potter, where do you think you’re –”

“Get out of my way!”

Shoving a startled Ernie Macmillan out of his way, he grabbed the latch of the rear door and threw it open. The rattling and clanking of the train suddenly was far louder as Harry maneuvered himself to jump to the rear cab, the wind whistling by his ears...

CRACK.

CRUNCH.

Harry could only slam his eyes shut as the wizard who had Apparated between the cars was slammed bodily against the moving rear cab, his broomstick breaking to smithereens as he fell beneath the wheels. There was barely any blood, and not even a scream, but Harry knew no man could have survived it, wizard or not. Just what I need, to be blamed for more deaths...

Gritting his teeth, Harry carefully jumped to the rear cab and pulled the door open – even as the Hit Wizards erupted out of the car he had left.

“It’s Potter! Get –”

But Harry wasn’t wasting time. Slamming the door shut behind him, he ran for his life, barely holding onto his broom, cloak and wand as he struggled to pull out his mirror. Fortunately for him, the aisle was nearly deserted, and it only took a few seconds to reach the door at the very back of the train. He pulled it open and darted onto the tiny platform, slamming the door shut behind him with a metallic bang that barely sounded over the clank of the train’s wheels on the tracks...

“Tonks, I’m out of options!” Harry shouted at the mirror. “Where the hell are you?”

“Get to the roof, I’m coming in hot!” Tonks shouted back, her voice barely audible from the mirror. Harry’s eyes widened incredulously as he looked around wildly. How the hell was he supposed to –

He heard the thud of a body slamming against the door, and Harry knew he had only seconds. Grabbing onto his Firebolt with his left hand and holding his wand and cloak in the other, he jumped off of the cab – and did a 360 degree turn, yanking the broom as hard as he could back towards the train. The sky and ground shifted sickeningly as he wrenched himself right side up and tried to adjust his speed to match the train. The Express didn’t travel incredibly fast, but he knew that he would suffer a similar fate to the Apparating wizard if his speed was wrong...

And then he heard it – a low droning roar, like the sound of a speeding sports car... or a giant motorbike...

* * *

Larshall could hardly believe his eyes. This isn’t possible, he thought wildly. How the hell – why would he be here now? This is insanity... unless Kemester was right after all...

“It’s Sirius Black!”

And indeed it was him, screaming in on the giant motorbike that had made him famous amongst the wizarding community. His long hair was flying free, his Azkaban prison robes replaced with jeans and a leather jacket. His wand wasn’t drawn, but Larshall knew it was only a matter of time.

And the infamous convict was flying directly towards Harry Potter, dismounting his broom on the roof of the Hogwarts Express and running for his life, pausing every few seconds to shoot a curse at a nearby flying Hit Wizard.

But Larshall knew, with a sick feeling flooding his stomach, that nothing Potter had would even stand a chance against Black, especially on the motorbike that the murderer handled better than a broom...

“Larshall! Orders!” Clyvis screamed, flying up to where Larshall was gliding over the train, coordinating the attack. “Do we engage Black?”

“Call the Aurors for reinforcements, he’s under their jurisdiction!” Larshall shouted. “Get a message to HAIT, but keeping moving on Potter –”

But his voice was cut off at a new noise – the sound of rubber wheels squealing on the metal roof of the Hogwarts Express. Screams erupted from the cab below, but neither Black nor Potter paid them any mind. Then before Larshall’s astounded eyes, Potter leapt onto the seat behind Black and seized the man tightly. He’s going to escape... he’s going with Black...

There was another squeal of tires and a blast of black exhaust from the motorbike, and the bike leapt into the air, going faster than ever. Black was whooping – whooping – with glee, while Potter was still shooting spells at any Hit Wizard who was close. Larshall felt his stomach clench with rage. He’ll pay for this... humiliating me...

“Do we pursue, sir?” Lassion yelled, zooming up to Larshall’s position. “I think some of the faster of us could catch them –”

“And get pulled into another ‘aeroplane accident’?” Larshall snarled. “Black’s more of a daredevil than Potter, he’ll pull stunts that’ll leave his pursuers dead or worse!”

“But he’s escaping with Potter!”

“Let him!” Larshall roared, glaring at the shrinking spot that was the motorbike. “Potter’s got to get to Hogwarts at some point, and by the looks of things, Black’s taking him there! Send the Auror reinforcements to Hogwarts, and see if we can send some

Dementors there as well – if we can't stop Potter here, we'll stop him there!"

* * *

Harry was in shock as the motorbike decelerated, skidding on the ground sharply as it hit the dirt. The ride had been half an hour of terrifying speed and dangerous flying, as Sirius had pushed the monstrous motorbike beneath them to its limit. They had long passed the Hogwarts Express, and by the looks of things, had landed not far from the mountain cave where Sirius had hid last year.

Sirius hammered on the brakes sharply, and Harry was nearly thrown from the motorbike as it slid around in a ridiculously sharp turn, kicking up a wall of dust and grit as the bike sputtered to a stop. Both riders were breathing heavily by the time the bike's engine had quieted.

Harry swallowed hard as he stumbled off of the bike – it had been incredibly uncomfortable riding behind Sirius, the bike wasn't built for two, despite its size – and he looked with a mixture of relief, astonishment, and fear at his godfather, who was trying to casually dismount the motorbike.

"Sirius..." Harry gasped. "But how..."

The older man shrugged. "Told you I'd be there if you needed me, Harry."

"But you told Dumbledore you wouldn't leave Grimmauld Place!" Harry exclaimed. "And now..."

"Some things aren't always what they seem, Harry," Sirius replied, and there was a definite wry sound to his voice as he finally faced Harry. Before his astonished eyes, the man screwed up his face...

And transformed into the pink-haired, smirking visage of Nymphadora Tonks in an oversized biker's outfit.

Harry's mouth fell open with astonishment. "Bloody hell."

"That's what I'd say too," Tonks agreed heavily, leaning against the bike as she pulled off the leather jacket. "It's hot riding that thing. A great rush, but I don't know how Sirius likes it."

"It was suicidal, that's what it was!" Harry replied, his voice a mix of awe and exasperation as he put a hand to his head. "How did you... where did you - whose bloody idea was this -?"

"Sirius', not mine," Tonks reassured him with a smile. "He thought it would be the perfect bluff to get the Hit Wizards off your trail if you had to run... and it worked."

"Nearly killed us both," Harry muttered, taking a few shaky steps and leaning against a nearby tree. "Damn, that was too close. I didn't expect them to bring in Dementors -"

"Nobody expected that, Harry," Tonks said with a shrug, awkwardly rolling the motorbike towards the tree. "The Hit Wizards kept the entire investigation very quiet - although you do have to admit it that it was a nice plan to smoke you out."

"And it worked, too," Harry finished with a scowl. "I'm not even at Hogwarts yet, for Merlin's sake!"

"We had to stop here," Tonks replied as she rubbed sweat from her brow. "According to what I heard, Kemester's got as much of HAIT as he could find ready to arrest you the second you got off that train. Even presuming your charms lasted that long, it would have been a long shot getting to the carriages up to the castle."

"We need to get to the carriages," Harry said heavily. "But I bet Kemester's got them under guard..."

"Probably only a token force, and if he got the people I hope he did, they won't be a problem. The trick will be blending in..."

But a smile was already spreading across Harry's face as his eyes turned to the motorbike. "I've got an idea."

He told her. She raised an eyebrow, but soon her smile matched Harry's.

* * *

Harry tried to keep his swagger casual as he moved towards the carriages, an easy smile on his face, even though his heart was pounding furiously. His hair, magically lengthened and coloured a ridiculous auburn, coupled with the flamboyant goatee and beard and a few other subtle adjustments courtesy of Tonks, made him look nothing like the Harry Potter that people would usually recognize. She told me to look for the three men in Auror robes, because if Kemester is in command, he'd undoubtedly put them in a position of little importance, considering how much antagonism there is now between the Aurors and Hit Wizards...

He froze in midstep as the last rays of sunlight flashed off the carriages – and off of the creatures pulling them. Harry had never seen anything like them before in his life. They looked like starved horses, with ghostly eyes and massive bat-like wings. They've never been there before... the carriages always pulled themselves...

"Looking at something, sir?"

Harry nearly jumped as he turned to meet the casual warm smile of a blond-haired man in Auror robes. A long unsightly scar seamed his face, slicing across his nose and winding down the side of his face to trail down his neck. It made the man's face seem extremely lopsided, almost hideous, but a note of cheerfulness was in his voice. This must be Rogan Wilson, one of those Aurors that Tonks mentioned!

"A centaur's hindquarters," Harry replied smoothly, looking back at the carriages.

Wilson cocked an eyebrow. "That's a peculiar codeword, Nymphadora."

“And I thought I told you never to call me Nymphadora,” Harry replied, let a dangerous note creep into his voice, but Wilson was already chuckling.

“Relax, Tonks, I know it’s you. Undercover already?”

“Plain clothes detail, actually,” Harry replied with a shrug. “Kemester wants somebody leading the carriages, so he told me to take the one in front that the new teachers typically use to come up to the school.”

Wilson wrinkled his nose. “Not on combat duty? What’s Kemester thinking, you’re one of the best marksmen in the division, and rumor has it Black might show up in Hogsmeade with Potter! He should have you up by the train or with the rest of HAIT, not babysitting!”

“Well, somebody put him in command of this mess,” Harry said with a roll of his eyes. “In any case, it looks like the train’s already coming in. Any other things I should be aware of?”

“Couple of powerful Shield Charms attached to each carriage, and the required password to get in once the doors are shut is uncertainty,” Wilson said with a wink. “Have fun babysitting.”

Harry rolled his eyes again and headed towards the carriage at the very front of the queue. “Uncertainty,” he muttered under his breath. A second later, the carriage door swung open and Harry pulled himself inside.

The moment the door closed, he pulled out his mirror. “Tonks,” he whispered urgently, “if you get in a carriage after you cause the necessary amount of chaos, the password is ‘uncertainty’, got it?”

“ Understood,” Tonks replied tensely. “Any problems with the Aurors?”

“They thought I was you undercover – it worked perfectly.”

“Great. They probably wouldn’t have paid you a second thought anyways, but be on your guard. As soon as HAIT starts to escort the students towards the carriages, I’ll make my move.”

Harry held his breath and chanced a glance out of the carriage window any time he felt that nobody was looking. Once he caught Wilson’s eye, but the other Auror just waved and smiled after Harry gave him a thumbs-up.

A few minutes later, he heard voices – a lot of voices – coming towards the train. He waited to hear Hagrid’s traditional shout, but to his surprise – and worry – he heard nothing. Well, Dumbledore did say he was sending him on a mission, but he still should be back by now –

BOOM.

“It’s Black! Get to the carriages! Find –”

The voice was abruptly cut off. Shouts and screams erupted around the carriages as Harry shoved the carriage door open and drew his wand. Someone – and Harry had a very good idea who – had launched a surprise attack against Kemester’s squad, and was now engaging them in a pitched battle. Harry couldn’t see all the details, but from the sounds of the explosions and sharply cut off shouts, Harry guessed that Tonks was doing very well.

“Get to the carriages!” Harry shouted as he climbed out, but Wilson motioned for him to stand back and get back in. “All students, get into the carriages immediately, they are protected!”

There was nearly a stampede as students flooded towards the carriages, several with wands drawn and horrified looks on their faces. Harry could hear prefects trying to restore order, and he swallowed hard. This is all because of me. All this fear, all this chaos... it’s because of what I’ve done...

He was surprised to feel that he barely felt any remorse.

Another explosion rocked the courtyard between the train and the carriages. Harry heard three bangs in rapid succession somewhere to the left, and he gritted his teeth.

There was a rapid scuffling, and Wilson's scarred face came into view. "We've got them all in, get up to the school and tell Dumbledore that Black's here and fighting!"

He nodded quickly as the carriages jolted into motion, his heart sinking as he heard another explosion. Tonks hadn't been able to make it to the carriages in time, and that meant –

CRACK.

"Merlin!"

"Ow, that hurt!"

"Tonks, you Apparated on top of me, and you think you're in pain?"

"Oh shut up, you liked me on top of you," Tonks muttered, yanking off Harry's Invisibility Cloak. Under it, she was wearing her regular Auror robes embroidered with a small silver H.A.I.T. near the chest. "Good plan, by the way."

"You're lucky you got alive," Harry muttered, his face still red from Tonks' comment. "Good idea to Metamorphose just your upper body into Sirius' – I'm sure his yelling of the spells would have convinced them he was actually there."

"Nearly ripped my robes to pull it off, but it worked," Tonks replied, settling herself into the seat next to Harry and angling her wand at his face. With a few muttered spells, Harry was back to normal, an irritated look on his face.

"What's the problem now?"

"Those spells were ridiculously uncomfortable to apply and remove," Harry replied with a scowl.

“Good thing we only have to do them once then,” Tonks countered with a grin. “Now I just have to pass word that Sirius Black is on the loose in Hogsmeade to Dumbledore.”

“You think he’ll buy it?” Harry asked worriedly.

“Of course, my real message is that I managed to rescue you from a planned Ministry seize operation, and that Sirius agreed to my whole plan,” Tonks continued, her smile widening. “And won’t Kemester be surprised that you showed up in Hogwarts with nary a scratch?”

“He’ll be livid, you know,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “Frankly, I’m amazed we both managed to get out of this, you in particular. How many Aurors and Hit Wizards were you fighting? Fifteen? Twenty?”

“Twenty-five, but it was more like six, and I had the Invisibility Cloak,” Tonks said with a smirk.

“How does twenty-five become six?” Harry asked skeptically.

“Well, Harry, it’s something like this,” Tonks said with a wink. “There are some people in life that money can buy; for everyone else, there are headshots.”

Author's Notes: yes, it's been a long time since I updated, but here's the next chapter. A little tricky to write, and the chapter does feel a bit slow, but here it is. Until next time, read, review, and enjoy!

By the time Larshall had arrived in the unused classroom that had been designated as the Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team's 'office', Kemester was pacing across the room, swearing under his breath with every step as his boots rhythmically hit the floor.

"You're early for the meeting," Larshall said quietly, watching as Kemester slowed his pace. "Dinner not appetizing for you?"

"I had no desire to sit at the table in that hall and bloody watch as Potter flaunted his success in front of me," Kemester growled. "What the hell are you doing here, anyways? You should be back at the Ministry."

"I'm supposed to give an eyewitness report to Professor Dumbledore regarding the involvement of Sirius Black in Potter's escape," Larshall replied heavily, closing the heavy door behind him. "Potter's flight pretty much guarantees his guilt in a court of law, and conspiring with Black will likely send him on a one-way ticket to Azkaban." He grinned weakly. "We've finally got him, Dmitri, and there's nothing Dumbledore can do or say to stop it. Potter implicated himself –"

"You think Dumbledore will care?" Kemester interrupted with a snort. "You honestly think that the Ministry will have a bloody hope of compelling Dumbledore to do anything he doesn't want to do?"

"He's got to follow the law," Larshall said doggedly, "and unless he wants to be hauled in himself, he's not going to stop us."

"Yeah, and I'm going to be Minister for Magic someday," Kemester snapped. "Let's be realistic here, Reed, just for a few seconds. Like it or not, Fudge is terrified of Dumbledore – everyone knows that he's no match for the Headmaster in terms of power. But that's not the only thing – he's more terrified of Dumbledore's influence. A lot of people still like the old man, regardless of what the Prophet has

written about him, and he's got a lot of political power in the International Confederation of Wizards, something Fudge does not have, considering the Quidditch World Cup fiasco last year. A lot of international wizards blamed the mess on the Ministry, not Dumbledore. Like it or not, Fudge doesn't have the nerve to take down Dumbledore without unbreakably solid proof – and we don't have that. That's one of the reasons I couldn't get the damned warrants to take Potter here in the school – the school governors are terrified of Dumbledore, and are thus demanding unshakable proof of Potter's guilt, which we don't have at the moment! We planned to bring Potter in as a suspect, and he's innocent before proven guilty... despite his guilt in other matters."

"He still ran!"

"He's acted rashly before when pursued by Hit Wizards," Kemester muttered, "so just that isn't enough."

"And since when are you Harry Potter's staunchest supporter?" Larshall snarled.

"It's Black," Kemester said heatedly. "Something's bloody off about this whole mess, and it's been off since the very beginning, since Gringotts! Let me ask you this – everything we know suggests Black wants Potter dead, yet he delivered Potter to Hogwarts safe and sound. Can you tell me the motive behind that? Hell, everything Shacklebolt has released about that investigation suggests that Black was in Tibet – why the hell would he come back here? It just doesn't make any goddamned sense!"

Larshall opened his mouth, and then closed it as he scratched his chin with a frown. "I hadn't considered that..."

"And that's not the only thing," Kemester added with a grimace. "There's something about the Ollivander's explosion that's been bothering me – why would Potter even bother to set off the explosives so close to him? If he had been much closer to the explosion, the glass from the exploding storefront would have ripped him to shreds!"

Why would he set off an explosive so close to him; why take that risk?”

“Because he’s incompetent?”

“I don’t buy that for one second,” Kemester growled. “Potter was smart enough to break into Gringotts –”

“Another case we have no solid proof for, and Scrimgeour closed the case file –”

“Reed, use your fucking head!” Kemester snarled, slamming his fist on the table. “You know what, regardless of Potter’s responsibility here, the fact remains that we’re not going to be able to arrest him at Hogwarts, at least not while Dumbledore’s still around!”

“What about Umbridge? She’ll back us up – I already know you got the warrants from her, and given her Wizengamot position, it was perfectly legal. And come on, Fudge is the bloody Minister for Magic – he can overrule Dumbledore whenever the hell he wants!”

Kemester snorted. “If it were that simple, Fudge would have stripped Dumbledore of his power the second Dumbledore began contradicting him. The thing is, Fudge is playing a very tricky game, one he can’t afford to botch if he wants to respectably assume control over the school. Making an overt power grab by overruling Dumbledore all at once would destabilize Hogwarts and send the Wizengamot into chaos. No, Dumbledore’s got his power base here, and even with us here reinforcing the Ministry’s influence, we still won’t be able to overrule Dumbledore and haul Potter out of here. To do that, we need proof of Potter’s involvement in the Ollivander’s attack.”

“What about conspiring with Black –”

Kemester sighed, the anger slowly fading from his face. “Reed, if I understood that, this case would be a hell of a lot easier. The only thing that seems to make sense is that it was some kind of decoy,

Polyjuice or something, that Potter used with one of his allies to throw everything off and have us second-guessing ourselves.”

“That’s reaching,” Larshall said skeptically. “And that’s also assuming Potter’s got other allies.”

“Well what else am I supposed to think?” Kemester snapped. “That Black’s somehow innocent of all those murders and saving Potter’s neck out of love for his family? That Black somehow didn’t recognize Potter when he rescued him? That Potter somehow didn’t recognize his mysterious savior? And there’s more missing links too – like how the hell Potter managed to get in the carriages when I had a group of Aurors shielding them, with a bloody password too!”

Larshall frowned. “Disillusionment Charm? Or treachery?”

“Possibly both,” Kemester muttered, rubbing his jaw. “Problem is, Scrimgeour and Bones have effectively banned us from using Veritaserum on witnesses in an investigation, after that mess with Shackbolt. If you want to find anything there, you’ll have to be more subtle. Is there any way we can trace that motorbike?”

“I... well, I guess I could, but –”

“Start with that,” Kemester said finally, “and if that leads you to Black, all the better. And as for Potter... well, we can always work on forcing Dumbledore out, because that seems to be the only way that we’ll have a hope in getting Potter into custody.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” Larshall asked skeptically, cocking an eyebrow.

The faintest trace of a cool smile crossed Kemester’s face for an instant. “That the best thing – I don’t have to do anything. All I have to do is sit and... watch.”

“Since when have you been willing to do that?” Larshall asked incredulously. “You’re just going to wait for Umbridge to –”

“My investigation’s not stopping just because I can’t get at Potter yet,” Kemester murmured as he pulled a small hip flask out of his robes. He took a heavy pull from the flask before sighing. “I may not be able to move against Potter now, because I can’t move against Dumbledore, but I can gather evidence, build a case... send Potter on the one way trip to Azkaban he deserves...”

“You had better be careful with that,” Larshall said warily, eyeing the flask. “If Umbridge sees you with that—”

“Moody carried his hip flask the entire damned year, why can’t I?”

“Because his wasn’t filled with Irish goblin rye,” Larshall said in a low voice.

Kemester snorted. “Well, I’m going to need something to get me through this bloody year.”

* * *

Dumbledore was silent for a long few seconds as Larshall finished his report. The blue eyes were half-closed in thought, and despite her relative calm, Tonks fought to keep her breathing steady. She had already told Dumbledore the rough details of what she had done – enough that she wouldn’t compromise Harry’s plans – but she knew there were holes in her story that a trained listeners would catch.

And she knew that Dumbledore was an excellent listener.

“So you broke off pursuit once Black escaped with Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said finally, looking up at Larshall, a very serious expression on his face. “You presumed that Black could be dealt with at Hogsmeade Station.”

“Yes,” Larshall said, throwing an uneasy glance at Kemester, who had been intently listening to Larshall’s entire report with narrowed eyes. “I directed that the Auror reinforcements be directed there, and for HAIT to be notified of this development.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said slowly, his blue eyes sweeping the table occupied by assorted Hogwarts professors and the newly inducted members of the Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team. They rested for an instant on Tonks, and her breath nearly caught in her throat. But then Dumbledore’s gaze returned to Larshall, now looking visibly nervous at being the center of the Headmaster’s attention.

“Am I cleared to leave, sir?” Larshall asked hesitantly.

“Just a moment, please, Mr. Larshall,” a new voice said from the far side of the table. Tonks frowned as she saw a short, frog-faced woman get to her feet. Tonks recognized the high-pitched, breathy voice and the bright pink cardigan pulled over her business-like robes instantly – but then again, Dolores Umbridge wasn’t difficult to forget. The woman herself made sure of that.

“I believe,” Umbridge began slowly, a note of confusion in her voice, “that I may not have completely understood all the little fine details that coincided with your report here. Would you mind if I clarify a few points, just for the benefit of all? By your leave, of course, Headmaster.”

“Not a problem,” Dumbledore replied pleasantly. A muscle was visibly twitching in Professor McGonagall’s jaw.

“It’s just that... well, I’m a tad unsure of your whole purpose by the Hogwarts Express,” Umbridge began, the perplexed expression – which didn’t reach her eyes – plainly evident on her face. “I mean, you’re a busy man, as a Hit Wizard – why would you take time out of your schedule to follow the Hogwarts Express, a transportation route in which little has happened out of the ordinary for the past hundred years?”

Tonks gritted her teeth. She knew where Umbridge was going – and she also knew that she couldn’t stop the new Defense Professor, her superior, from talking. Only Dumbledore can do that...

“My task force was working on an investigation,” Larshall replied slowly. “Our orders were to take in a suspect in the Ollivander’s

bombings for questioning. As according to our warrant, the Dementors under our control swept the train, and then we moved in. The suspect, unfortunately, was... difficult."

"A Hit Wizard died to bring in this suspect, didn't he?" Umbridge asked kindly. "I'm so sorry for your loss, and the great loss to the Ministry."

I'm sure you are, Tonks thought hatefully. Probably never even met the man, you hag.

"In this case, the suspect's culpability is questionable," Larshall admitted. "Hit Wizard Dwight made a hasty, but critical error in attempting to Apparate between the train cars, a careless mistake that regrettably cost him his life. We're all sorry to lose him."

"Yet another loss for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Umbridge continued, beginning to pace around the table towards Larshall, who was standing opposite Dumbledore's position. Tonks' eyes narrowed. She knew that this had been scripted, and that Umbridge was setting herself up for her killing thrust...

"Sad, though, that it was another loss pursuing the same suspect," Umbridge finished, a cold grin moving onto her toad-like face as she turned towards Dumbledore. "Five good men have now died pursuing Harry Potter, who has evaded justice –"

"Potter was cleared!" Kingsley barked, his eyes flashing. Despite herself, Tonks cocked an eyebrow – she didn't suspect that Dumbledore would put Kingsley up to defending Harry. No wonder Kingsley sounds so strained...

"Then why did he flee the law?" Umbridge asked accusingly. "He fought off the Dementors and ran from the Hit Wizards, only to be 'rescued' by Sirius Black, a convicted felon!"

"Irony," Rogan Wilson muttered, leaning towards Tonks, "that the man who wants to kill Potter saves his life."

“All evidence that has been collected by the Auror Department, prior to my transfer to this team, was that Sirius Black was in Tibet,” Kingsley said evenly. “Why would he travel tens of thousands of kilometers to get back into England, with a Kiss Warrant still on his head?”

“Since when has Sirius Black proven to be rational?” a grizzled Hit Wizard added with a snort.

“Odds are,” Professor Snape said grimly, “that it was some sort of imposter who rescued Potter from the Ministry’s pursuit. Some accomplice of Potter, willing to disregard the law to achieve Potter’s ends...”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said quietly, “Harry Potter has been in custody for most of this summer –”

“My custody, at that,” Kingsley growled through clenched teeth. “And I would know if Potter tried to leave.”

Tonks could barely restrain her snort at Kingsley’s lies. Really, how long does Dumbledore think he can keep having Kingsley lie like this? Both of them have likely realized by now that Harry’s trying to make himself uncontainable...

“Ah, yes, Mr. Shacklebolt, your custody,” Umbridge said with a nod and a trace of a grin. “Such a shame, though, that he mysteriously disappeared during the Gringotts robbery –”

“And if I could have prevented whatever incident that happened that day, I would have,” Kingsley growled, “but unfortunately, I was locked in a Hit Wizard holding cell.”

“For which you were amply compensated, Shacklebolt,” the grizzled Hit Wizard snapped. “What about that inquiry that questioned the integrity of our office –”

“Enough,” Dumbledore said, rising to his feet. “You were all chosen for this team based upon your levelheadedness and your willingness

to work in a bipartisan environment, and the last problems we need now are quarrels.”

“Then why don’t you release Mr. Potter for questioning into the Ollivander’s bombings?” Larshall suddenly asked. Kemester shot the man a warning look, but Larshall didn’t seem to care. “I was there, Professor, and so was Harry Potter. He’s a suspect, and we need all the information that we can if we want to track down what happened.”

“I already released to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement the details that Mr. Potter gave me when I spoke to him about the Ollivander’s attacks,” Dumbledore replied with a slight frown. “He told me everything he knew about the incident.”

“With all due respect, sir, I would like to conduct a full Ministry interrogation,” Larshall said curtly. “It’s not that I do not trust you, but... he may have lied to you, or withheld information.”

And it wouldn’t be the first time either, Tonks thought.

Professor McGonagall cocked an eyebrow skeptically. “Mr. Larshall, are you suggesting that a fifteen year old teenager deceived one of the most powerful wizards in the world?”

“Although,” Umbridge said with a note of smug curiosity in her voice, “one might question that reputation, Headmaster, given your rather stark unwillingness to cooperate with the Ministry in recent cases. Blocking such an interrogation with no adequate cause or reason might prove –”

“According to his rights protected under Wizengamot law, Harry Potter does not have to submit to an interrogation if he does not want to, at least not while he is at my school,” Dumbledore said slowly, smiling slightly as he met Umbridge’s widening eyes. “He has not even had the chance to speak with any legal counsel, something that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in their admirable haste to bring Harry in, may have overlooked.”

“Then get him a lawyer,” Larshall said bluntly.

“Headmaster,” Umbridge said slowly, a grin beginning to crawl across her face as he met Dumbledore’s grin with her own, “are you suggesting that Mr. Potter should not submit to an interrogation simply because he is a Hogwarts student –”

“Not at all, my dear Dolores,” Dumbledore replied easily, “but that all due processes are taken into accord. If Harry Potter is to submit to a Ministry-approved interrogation regarding the events surrounding the Ollivander’s bombings, he must do so in the presence of his legal counsel, and since he is still a minor, in the presence of his legal guardian. And, as you very well know, Dolores, such a procedure must be approved by the school governors, particularly in such a serious matter. Finally, he must have full legal counsel if he is indeed a suspect in this investigation, a serious charge indeed.”

Umbridge narrowed her eyes, and Tonks could sense the growing anger in the woman. The Aurors and Hit Wizards around the table tensed, already preparing for the inevitable explosion.

“Perhaps, then,” Kemester said suddenly, sitting up and looking around the table, “we should pursue the original purpose of the Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team and discuss this matter through that medium. Would that be problematic, Madam Umbridge?”

Larshall looked as though he was about to speak, but his mouth snapped shut at a piercing glance from Kemester. Tonks turned to look at Umbridge, whose eyes were darting back between Kemester and Dumbledore. What’s Kemester playing at with this...

“Are you suggesting that HAIT interrogate Mr. Potter?” Umbridge asked with a strangely thoughtful expression.

“Is it not within our jurisdiction?” Kemester replied, drumming his fingers on the table. “This way, Ministry interests can be protected within a, well, controlled environment.” He threw a glance at Dumbledore. “I’m sure there wouldn’t be any problem with this, Headmaster?”

“Only that such an interrogation has no jurisdiction without full approval of Mr. Potter’s guardian and without the approval of the governors!” McGonagall snapped. “Professor Dumbledore, this is a blatant attempt for –”

“Minerva, enough,” Dumbledore replied quietly, rising to his feet. “Madam Umbridge, might have a few minutes to convene with the Deputy Headmistress and the other professors?”

“Of course, Professor,” Umbridge replied sweetly. “Where are we –”

“With all due respect, Dolores, I would ask a degree of privacy,” Dumbledore replied pleasantly.

Umbridge flushed indignantly. “I am a member of the Hogwarts staff like any other! How dare you exclude me –”

Not if McGonagall has anything to say about it, Tonks thought, the building fury plainly evident on the Transfiguration professor’s face. She’s got to be careful, though... Umbridge is dangerous...

Umbridge stared at Dumbledore for a long few seconds before nodding curtly. “If you’d be quick, Headmaster.”

“Of course, Dolores,” Dumbledore replied with a gracious nod as he pulled open the door to a side room. McGonagall and Snape followed him out, the former shooting Umbridge a deeply distrustful look before closing the door behind her.

The room was silent for a long few seconds before Kingsley let out a grunt. “You know Dumbledore’s going to make this difficult.”

Umbridge slowly set both palms on the table. “Larshall, you are to meet with the Minister at six o’clock tomorrow morning. I want him to be completely briefed on this matter.”

Larshall frowned. “You don’t want me to take him a request or anything?”

“Dumbledore will expect that,” Umbridge replied icily, “so we’ll have to be craftier than that. No, if your briefing is comprehensive enough, Fudge will know exactly what must be done if Dumbledore’s power is to be limited.”

She’s going for the governors, Tonks thought with a sickening jolt, the one group outside of both the Ministry and Dumbledore’s absolute control – and she’s planning on having Fudge buy them off! The bribe will be Ministry-sanctioned, but it’ll still be a bribe, and with the Ministry controlling the Prophet, nobody will know the difference. Dumbledore won’t have time to get to them before they’re all in Umbridge’s pocket! And with that, it’ll take no effort at all for HAIT to interrogate Harry on their terms!

She knew that Harry wasn’t going to be able to escape the interrogation – hells, Dumbledore knows it too, she thought. But what Harry does need is time to lay a convincing back-story with enough falsified evidence to throw off the Ministry investigation – dangerous enough, considering he’s the prime suspect in that damned bombing. Dumbledore’ll try and delay, but we’ll need more time than that for this to work...

She knew that if Harry was interrogated, they’d drag him to trial with even the most meager evidence – a trial that would ultimately send him to Azkaban.

“Until Larshall returns with what we need, however, there are still things that must be done,” Umbridge said primly. “Hit Wizard Sanders.”

“Yes, ma’am?” Sanders asked, scrambling to his feet, his scarred features marred with surprise. Bet he wasn’t expecting Umbridge to call for him, Tonks thought sourly. Hell, from the looks on Kemester’s face, he’s not too pleased with it either...”

“I want you to find that motorbike Black was using,” Umbridge ordered tersely. “If we find that bike, we can trace both Potter and Black – and send them both to Azkaban, where they belong.”

* * *

“Man, you don’t realize how good Hogwarts food is until you’re back at school,” Ron said contentedly, massaging his stomach as he traipsed up the stairs. “Not to say anything against my mum, but –”

“Ron,” Harry interrupted, his teeth clenched, “I’m really not in the mood to discuss food at the moment. My mind’s on slightly more important things right now.”

“You’re worried about the Ministry, Harry? Honestly, I already told you, Dumbledore will do his nut and everything will be fine. They can’t touch you here –”

“You see, I’d like to believe that, but with that hag Umbridge and the entire bloody HAIT squadron at the school, it might be a little more difficult for me to accept it.” Harry snorted. “It’s obvious that with them here, Hogwarts is no way near as secure as we’d like it to be.”

“You know they can’t act here without Dumbledore’s consent, though,” Ron said with a frown. “Remember how angry he got when the Dementors showed up at that Quidditch match when they weren’t supposed to? Well, I’d bet he wasn’t informed that the Dementors were going to hit the Hogwarts Express either. Odds are, if the Ministry’s behind it –”

“They were –”

“Then they better have an ironclad warrant or they can’t do squat to you,” Ron finished with a shrug. “Dad’s told me about a few cases where the Department of Magical Law Enforcement didn’t get good warrants, and the lawyers the Death Eaters hired for the Wizengamot exploited that to no end in the last war. Honestly, Harry, I think you’ll be okay.”

“God, I hope you’re right,” Harry muttered, “but it’s not just me I’m worried about.”

Ron carefully looked around to check that they were alone before lowering his voice. "You're worried about Snuffles, right?"

"When Tonks impersonated him, she planted the trail on him, that he's somewhere nearby—"

"He's back in London, though," Ron pointed exasperatedly. "Harry, they won't be able to track Snuffles if he's not even there."

Harry was suddenly struck with a thought, one that made his gut clench. "But what about the motorbike? Can the Ministry track that?"

"I dunno... Dad pestered Snuffles a lot for details about it – you know how obsessed he is with Muggle vehicles – but Snuffles never said anything about it."

"Which either means it's some sort of secret or he doesn't even know," Harry finished with a grimace. "Can it be tracked?"

Ron raised his hands helplessly. "Harry, I have no idea. That's Dad's specialty, you might want to talk to him. How did Tonks even get it?"

"She must have got it from Hagrid," Harry murmured as they climbed another set of stairs, thinking hard. "If I remember correctly, Hagrid was the last one who had it..."

"But wouldn't he have had to turn it in to the Hit Wizards when they captured Snuffles?" Ron asked after a few seconds of contemplation. "I mean, he was sort of infamous for that bike – wouldn't they want it?"

"Still doesn't answer the question how Tonks found it, the MLE would never have given it to her without a fight," Harry said with a scowl. "She's an Auror, after all."

"Could Kingsley have gotten it?" Ron asked suddenly, his eyes brightening. "Tonks could have asked Kingsley for it, and since he's in charge of the Aurors tracking Snuffles –"

“Shacklebolt wouldn’t do that,” Harry said disgustedly. “If he knew what Tonks was doing – and considering his reputation, he’s bound to have at least some of the details – he wouldn’t trust her to even borrow that motorbike.”

“You still don’t trust him, don’t you?” Ron asked, disbelief creeping into his voice. “Harry, he’s risking his neck to protect you, and you still don’t –”

“He doesn’t trust me,” Harry growled, “and vice-versa.”

“Right,” Ron replied, turning away to mask his grimace, but Harry still saw it. He knew what Ron’s anger was about this time.

“Have you talked to her, Ron?”

“We’re prefects together, Harry, we sort of have to talk,” Ron snapped. “And she was worried about you, you know. When the Dementors came, she nearly lost control; she kept saying you were going to do something that would get you in trouble –”

Harry’s laugh was harsh, bitter, and short. “Yeah, guess I might have done that.”

“She doesn’t want things to be like this, Harry,” Ron said quietly. “And I agree with her, this time.”

“And so do I,” Harry said sharply, rounding on Ron. “But you know what? Until I know that I can trust her, and she won’t go blabbing to the nearest authority whenever I step out of line, willingly or otherwise, I’m not wasting my time.”

Ron rubbed his temple with frustration. “You honestly think this is easy for me, Harry? I hate being caught in the middle like this, between two people who won’t talk because of something petty and stupid –”

“So we’re just going to ignore last year, then?” Harry growled.

“Harry, it’s not far from what this is,” Ron replied back steadily, his defiant eyes meeting Harry’s. “Look, I know enough about what you’re trying to do, and I respect it. Dad’s told me about what the Aurors had to do when Crouch was around, and if you’re fighting fire with fire, I can understand that. Hell, I don’t know what happened today, but I can respect that you fought like hell to avoid getting captured by the Hit Wizards –”

“They would have gotten me if I didn’t, Ron! You think I’m not sorry that that Hit Wizard died chasing me?”

“Are you sorry?” Ron shot back.

Harry was tight-lipped. They looked at each other for a long few seconds before Ron finally broke the silence.

“She wants you as a friend, Harry.”

“I’m sure she does,” Harry muttered, more to himself than to Ron.

“She doesn’t have a lot of friends. A lot of people don’t like her.”

“That’s understandable. Most of the time she’s insufferable.”

Ron groaned with frustration. “Damn it, Harry, she sees things in black and white to some degree, we both know that, and she’s certainly not happy you betrayed our trust when we’ve been behind you all these years. I wasn’t too happy about it either, but I got over it. But she’s more stubborn than I am.”

“Good for her.”

“You’re getting ridiculously paranoid, Harry, and talk about bloody insufferable!” Ron finally exploded. “You won’t even give her a goddamn chance!”

“She blew her chance!”

“And if friendships are built on one chance, how strong is that friendship?” Ron countered, his eyes blazing with anger and disappointment. “She still wants to help you.”

“She wants to help the Boy-Who-Lived, not me,” Harry growled, “and she wants to toe the little line Dumbledore drew in the sand – a line I’m going to end up crossing. Hell, it’s a line I’ve already crossed.”

Ron looked at Harry for a long few seconds before giving a heavy sigh. “I think Hermione knows that rules are going to be broken, Harry. I just don’t think she really understands how ugly this is going to end up being. I mean, I’ve heard my Dad talk about the Aurors and what they’ve had to do sometimes... I just don’t think Hermione realizes what you’re going to end up having to do.”

“She needs to come into that realization, Ron, before I start trusting her,” Harry said grimly.

“You might be waiting a long time, mate,” Ron replied seriously. “She’s as stubborn as you are.”

“Ron...” Harry made an exasperated noise as he clenched both his fists. “Look, I know what you’re looking for here, I’m not stupid. Do you trust that I know what I’m doing?”

“For the most part,” Ron replied with a shrug. “I’ve got doubts, but I see why you did what you did... what you’re doing now.”

“Then trust me on this,” Harry said, his voice toneless as if he was issuing an ultimatum, “that when Hermione proves to me that she can be trusted, and that I can count on her as a friend and a confidant, she can come back and I’ll be waiting with open arms. Until then...” He shrugged. “If you only knew the stakes I was playing for, Ron, then you’d know...”

Ron swallowed hard. “Look, mate, I gotta get back down to the Great Hall and help Hermione bring the first years up –”

“Go ahead, I’ve already got the password,” Harry replied dully with a wave of his hand. “See you in a bit.” He turned to walk away.

“Someday, Harry, you’re going to end up crossing that line in the sand too many times,” Ron muttered to himself. “Even for me.”

* * *

“And so it’s come to this,” Dumbledore said heavily, closing the door to the side room with a click and locking it with a tap of his wand. “I had honestly hoped we would have more time.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” McGonagall began stiffly, “allowing Dolores Umbridge to interrogate Harry Potter would be disastrous. You know that. Both for your political stature and your authority at Hogwarts.”

“Potter knows too much,” Snape said flatly, “and having been interrogated by Aurors before – under your orders, Headmaster – I have little doubt that they will soon uncover the truth and a great deal more. The Order could be compromised.”

“Not to mention the location of Black and the... well, the other piece of knowledge you gave him after that disastrous night,” McGonagal added, her eyebrows forming a thin line across her forehead. “And who knows what other secrets Harry is trying to hide from the Ministry.”

“From certain elements of the Ministry, to be sure,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “I’m sure Miss Tonks knows much more than she’s telling, as does Sirius.”

“And you know that neither of them will betray Potter nor give up information to us,” Snape replied disgustedly. “Headmaster, as much as I would like to hear Potter spill all his little secrets, it would be ruinous to the Order to have its existence in Ministry record. And given that Potter has been using the Order Headquarters as his escape –”

“Kingsley already has an alibi regarding Harry’s whereabouts,” Dumbledore pointed out with a frown. “If he continues to follow his story –”

Snape snorted with disgust. “It won’t last under pressure, Headmaster, and you know that better than I do. He’s already being pushed to the breaking point, and an Auror with Shacklebolt’s principles won’t last in this game.”

“He can at least use his influence in HAIT to ensure no questions about Mr. Potter’s hiding place are asked,” McGonagall said curtly. “He has enough reputation to accomplish that, at least – although if I had my way, he would not even be involved in this mess. Surely, Albus, there is some way you can regulate the questions being asked in this interrogation –”

“If only I could, Minerva,” Dumbledore replied with a sigh, “but the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – and by extension, HAIT – may ask what questions they need to ascertain the truth behind Harry’s actions. And I cannot influence the choice of those questions, not without jeopardizing everything we’ve worked to obtain. There has already been discussion in the Minister’s office of whether my ‘defense and protection’ of Harry can be considered obstruction of justice, or whether it is enough to make me an accomplice in recent events.”

“And the day either of those charges will have weight will be the day the Dark Lord surrenders,” Snape snapped. “But we all knew this from the start that you could not interfere to protect Potter. That does not, however, prevent other members of the Order from acting –”

“And becoming targets,” Dumbledore cut Snape off sharply. “I am not Lord Voldemort, Severus, and I will not have members of the Order sent to Azkaban because of unnecessary risks. However,” he added, as Snape raised an eyebrow with incredulity, “I believe that we must do something to aid Harry, shield him from the interrogation for as long as we can. But we will not be able to stop this investigation, or hobble it to the point of uselessness. Not with Umbridge controlling it.”

“And Kemester’s likely going to be one of the two Hit Wizards placed on the interrogation team,” McGonagall added darkly. “Larshall will likely be involved as well, given his involvement in the Ollivander’s investigation. Is there any chance we can somehow get Kingsley on the interrogation team?”

“With Umbridge in charge, not a chance,” Snape said flatly. “She already knows of the animosity between him and Kemester, and she’ll want a unified front when interrogating Potter.”

“What about Nymphadora?” McGonagall asked doggedly. “As far we know, any involvement she’s had with Mr. Potter has remained secret – is there a chance that Umbridge could let her on the team?”

“She certainly has Harry’s best interests at heart,” Dumbledore mused, “although it is still unclear where her true loyalties lie. Umbridge might consider her...”

“Even with Miss Tonks on the interrogation committee, Headmaster, our interests still will not be protected,” Snape said harshly, folding his arms across his chest. “You know as well as I do that her loyalty is moving towards Potter exclusively, and if she has any loyalty to the Order at all – and that includes her keeping her position – she’ll have no choice but to follow Umbridge’s rules.”

“We need a third party involved in this,” Dumbledore murmured after a few seconds of silence, his eyes beginning to twinkle. “To represent the interests of Hogwarts – and the interests of the Order. Umbridge would have no choice but to approve the appointment of a third-party observer – particularly if the school governors decide to involve themselves. A single teacher, to monitor the proceedings... who is also a member of the Order.”

Snape and McGonagall exchanged glances – they both knew that with Hagrid’s absence, the only two teachers who could fill that vacancy were standing in the side room with Dumbledore at that very moment. And both, Dumbledore could see, did not want the position.

“I think, however,” Dumbledore said slowly, “that some of our more obvious biases might be criticized, and that means I have only one logical choice, a decision I do not wish to make.”

He turned to Snape. “Severus, I want you to serve as an impartial observer to Harry Potter’s interrogation.”

Emotion flashed across Snape’s face – fear, surprise, disappointment – before settling on incredulously building rage. “Please tell me, Headmaster, that you are joking.”

“Albus, I am more than willing to take on this capacity,” McGonagall said quickly, her gaze moving from Snape to Dumbledore. “I will be more than fair with Mr. Potter –”

“But Umbridge will not be looking for fairness,” Dumbledore said softly, yet firmly. “She’ll be looking for somebody who she believes will support her –”

Snape was breathing very fast, and both of his hands were clenched into tight fists. He looked as though he was going to explode, and Dumbledore knew that he only had a few minutes before the Potions Master lost his temper.

“I’m quite certain that Umbridge could be convinced –”

“I’m sorry, Minerva, but I have made my decision,” Dumbledore said, his eyes fixed on Snape’s. “Would you excuse us for a few minutes?”

The second the door closed behind McGonagall, Dumbledore began to speak. “Severus, please listen to me –”

“Dumbledore, are you out of your bloody mind?” Snape snarled. “Are you trying to have me killed?”

“Severus, you are one of my greatest assets, why would I want to have you killed?”

Snape gave a bitter laugh. "You know, I'd love to believe that sentiment, but something holds me back – oh, that's right, your insistence in putting me in situations that border on the impossible! You expect me to control that damned interrogation?"

"You do not need to control it, Severus," Dumbledore replied sharply. "You only need to guide it in the right direction –"

"And, of course, with such new power, the Dark Lord will want me to interfere on his behalf as well, but I suppose you've got that angle covered as well!"

"Lord Voldemort cannot afford to sacrifice you at this point in his plans," Dumbledore reasoned evenly. "Thus, if you confess failure to him, he will not have any choice but to allow you to carry on your work –"

"And all of this says nothing of how that bloody brat is going to take my involvement in his interrogation!" Snape finally exploded, his face contorting with fury. "Damn it, Dumbledore, he already wants me dead as it is!"

"Severus, be reasonable," Dumbledore said reprovingly. "You are his teacher, and any act made against you will not be acceptable by any means, particularly while you are involved with the Order."

Snape's laugh was filled with bitter rage and incredulity. "If you honestly believe that Potter's going to avoid attacking me just because I'm a teacher, then you are more hopelessly blind than I thought! Have you forgotten the events of his third year so quickly? He didn't have a problem attacking me then! And have you forgotten Black, his little mongrel bitch who has already had no compunctions attempting to kill me?"

"Severus, that's enough!" Dumbledore said firmly. "Harry knows, at this point, that any action taken against you would have dire consequences. He has certainly proven his intelligence and deduction in other regards."

Snape looked like he could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Dumbledore, I don't think you truly realize how much Potter wants me dead! To him, I betrayed his parents with the Prophecy, I stole away his money, and now I will join the committee to send him to Azkaban!"

Dumbledore froze, his blue eyes suddenly going icy cold. "He knows something of the incident regarding the Potter Vaults?"

"Some inkling at least," Snape spat, "and thanks to that gutless bastard Lupin, he knows I was somehow involved."

"And like the prophecy, his lack of complete information prevents him from knowing the whole truth of the matter –"

"Then bloody tell him!" Snape roared. "The longer you plan to keep him ignorant, the shorter my life will be!"

"There are some things he cannot know, yet... it is too early for the whole truth to come out –"

"So you plan to leave me to die," Snape finished disgustedly. "One more pawn sacrificed in your grand game."

"This is no game, Severus," Dumbledore replied seriously. "And we all are playing for the highest stakes imaginable – and everyone has a stake, even you."

"Not me," Snape growled as he turned away. "Not anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"What I'm bloody talking about, Dumbledore, is that I am done with this charade," Snape snarled. "I'm done being your spy, your man, your bloody pawn. I quit. I've played your little game for too damned long, and I'm not playing it anymore. I'm leaving."

"Voldemort will not –"

“Fuck him,” Snape’s voice was savage as he moved towards the door. “He can’t find me if I don’t want to be found – particularly not if I’m halfway across the world.”

“Severus, be reasonable! You’re letting fear control your actions –”

Snape turned to face Dumbledore, his face once again impassive even as his voice was tinged with caustic bitterness. “You think I’m doing this because of fear? Well, for once in your life, Dumbledore, you’re actually right. I fear the Dark Lord. I fear what Potter and Black are becoming, and the fact that Potter will soon set his bloodthirsty eyes on me. And I fear what is going to happen to this school if you continue to keep him blinded by his ignorance, paranoia, and rage.” He shook his head. “I’m done playing both sides in this Merlin-forsaken mess. My resignation will be on your desk by morning tomorrow.”

Dumbledore thought quickly, and though it pained his heart greatly to do what he was about to do, he knew that he had no choice. He couldn’t lose Snape – not now, and not to this. Even as the Potions Master’s fingers curled around the doorknob, Dumbledore spoke.

“Do this for Lily.”

Snape went stock still for a few seconds before turning to face Dumbledore, rage erupting across his face. “You dare drag her name into this, use me like this?”

“You swore to do anything to protect her son –”

“A son who wants to kill me!” Snape roared, kicking a chair out of the way with a crash. “If she were to see what Potter’s become –”

“She would wish for you to stay, risk even your own life, to ensure his safety and his redemption,” Dumbledore replied coldly. It was as if they were back on that windswept hill again, as Snape pleaded for Lily’s life. “Your cowardice disgusts me, Snape – I thought you were a better man than this.”

Snape shook with rage before slamming his fist into a desk, his lank black hair hanging over his trembling face.

“I hate you,” he whispered. “I fucking hate you, Dumbledore.”

“I know,” Dumbledore said quietly, hating himself with every word. “So... you will stay?”

“One year,” Snape growled, looking up to meet Dumbledore’s eyes. “Only one. I’ll see this through, and then I’m gone. It’s about damned time I moved on with my life.”

“You’ll abandon us to Lord Voldemort, Snape? Seek the coward’s way out?”

“And here I thought he was Potter’s responsibility,” Snape spat. “Why don’t you make sure he takes that responsibility?”

“I plan to speak with Harry tomorrow —”

“He doesn’t trust you anymore than he trusts me,” Snape said with a disgusted scowl. “Good luck penetrating his swollen head with anything important.”

“Harry has changed, Severus, far more than you realize —”

“Believe me, Headmaster, I know that,” Snape replied, opening the door violently in front of him. “I only wish, for all our sakes, that you did.”

And with that, he slammed the door behind him, leaving Dumbledore with a distinct feeling of sorrow and loss.

He knew that when Severus Snape left, he would never be seen again.

Author's Notes: yes, I know I promised that I'd update Rewriting the Song first, but that chapter's requiring more work and setup than I had thought, and meanwhile this chapter came out extremely easily, considering I had been wanting to write most of these scene for a long time now. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

The entire Gryffindor common room, albeit half empty, went silent when Harry climbed through the portrait hole.

Harry looked cautiously around the room before spotting the two people he actually wanted to talk to. Two people who at least listen to me, even if I don't entirely trust them...

"You know, I think I might smell something, George," one of the two said conversationally as he reclined in his armchair by the fire. "A faint whiff of something feminine..."

"I know exactly what you mean, Fred," the other agreed loudly with a broadening grin. "And it seems only to grow stronger as that bespectacled fellow approaches us —"

"Oh, bugger off, you two," Harry replied, even as he gave them an exasperated grin. "Why are you two so happy, anyways?"

"Well, you're actually here, aren't you?" Fred said, raising an eyebrow. "That means everything worked!"

"After a fashion," Harry muttered. "You've got an overloading problem with those stones you'll want to take a look at... although I won't deny the damned things are a work of genius."

"Well, a good craftsman always likes to hear his work's appreciated," George said good-naturedly, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Of course, a better craftsman always aspires to make things better —"

"And the best of them know exactly when to stop," Fred finished with a smirk. "We wouldn't want your little disguise to be permanent, now would we?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It faded, I'm all right. I just wanted... to thank you for your help." Harry wished he could say more, but he knew that in the crowded common room, already breaking into suspicious whispers, he wouldn't have a chance.

"No, Harry, I don't think you're quite all right," George replied with a sudden expression of deep concern. "We detect a strange aversion towards you that may or may not have anything to do with the fact that you are still wearing feminine perfume stolen out of Tonks' closet —"

Harry glared at both of them before shaking his head as the twins dissolved into laughter.

"You'll never let me forget this, will you?"

"Never," the twins replied at the exact same time.

"However, even if you want to forget that, you shouldn't forget this," Fred added, slapping a small parchment scroll into Harry's hand. "Read it when you get a chance — you might find it enlightening... probably as enlightening as the experience of —"

"Oh, shut up," Harry cut him off with a sigh, even as his heart was hammering in his chest. He already had an idea who the note might be from — and its urgency. "I'm going to bed — I had a long day."

"You see that, Fred?" George said with a nudge to his twin. "Dear sweet Harry needs to get his beauty sleep —"

"Oh, screw you," Harry replied, moving towards the staircase. He wasn't entirely lying — he was exhausted. Must have been the stress or the early morning, he thought to himself as he slowly climbed the stairs. And the last thing I need is any more problems...

He pulled open the door and immediately moved to his bed. His trunk had already been brought up, and he flipped it open thankfully, only

to find a tiny scrawled note on top of his haphazardly folded robes. He frowned as he flipped it open.

My math was slightly off a few days ago – you owe me another six Galleons for Umbridge’s textbook, and seven more for your other stuff. I want my money as soon as possible – tomorrow, if you could manage it.

Having fun yet?

N.T.

Harry frowned as he looked closer at the paper. It seemed like random letters had been written in red ink... clearly Tonks was trying to send a message.

Suddenly, he saw it, and he snorted at his own short-sightedness. Well, if she wanted to send a message that I’d catch, it’s a good way to do it... and given how most wizards don’t have an ounce of logic, they probably wouldn’t catch it –

“Hey Harry!” Neville Longbottom said brightly as he walked in and spotted Harry. “You’re up here surprisingly early – long day?”

“You could say that,” Harry replied tiredly. If you only knew, Neville... although, given your history, you might be someone I could trust... “Long day, long summer... well, you know me.”

Neville’s face fell. “I do know you, Harry... and I saw the Daily Prophet. They wrote some pretty nasty stuff in there about you.”

Harry snorted. “I’m not surprised.”

Neville shifted uncomfortably. “You know that my Gran and I believed and Dumbledore when you said You-Know-Who was back, right? Gran’s always said that he was going to come back someday.”

“Well, it’s true,” Harry snapped. “He is back, and I have the damned scars to prove it –”

“I know, Harry, and the fact that the Prophet doesn’t believe either you or Dumbledore... well, Gran cancelled our subscription, but we still heard about what happened... with the Ministry.”

Harry snorted. “And I suppose, just like the rest of them, that you believe I’m some twisted outlaw with a sick vendetta against the Department of Magical Law Enforcement –”

“Harry, if I believed that, I wouldn’t be here talking to you,” Neville replied, taking a deep breath. “If anything, when I want to hear that story, I want to hear it from you, not the Prophet. And even if some of it’s true, that some Hit Wizards died... well, I know you wouldn’t have wanted people to get killed. That’s not the Harry I knew. And I know you wouldn’t have blown up Ollivander’s.” Neville snorted and flipped open his trunk. “Honestly, people are just so blind sometimes, don’t you think?”

Harry said nothing, but a lump was churning in his gut. “And how do you know that I’m not a liar, that I don’t have a malevolent side that won’t hesitate to commit murder –”

“Because you would have killed Malfoy years ago,” Neville replied frankly. “And as for Ollivander’s... Harry, it doesn’t make sense. It’s a storehouse and a sanctum of magic – and you’ve always treated magic as something special, rather than just... routine.” The round-faced boy – looking older and more mature with every second – made a disgusted noise. “Most purebloods just treat magic like a tool. Hell, I’ve seen it more than once.”

Harry could only stare at Neville with incredulous disbelief. Could it be possible he had found a person that understood, that he could confide in, even with the terrible things he had done? I can’t trust him yet, but maybe...

The door slammed open, and Ron stormed into the room, clearly in a foul temper.

“Harry, you might not want to go downstairs for a bit,” he growled, tossing his wand on his dresser more than enough force.

“What did you do, Ron?” Neville asked with a bit of awe.

“Just put our good friend Seamus Finnigan in his place,” Ron snarled. “Pretentious little git, thinks that he knows what the hell you’ve been doing all summer —”

“He’s been reading the Prophet, hasn’t he?” Harry said darkly, pulling out his pajamas with a scowl.

“Not just that,” Ron spat, tearing open his own trunk. “Apparently, his precious mother didn’t want him to go back to Hogwarts because he believes you’re a dangerous tosser and Dumbledore’s going daft! The arse even asked me whether he could move to a different dormitory! Can you believe that, Harry?”

“Yes,” Harry replied steadily, clenching both his fists, “and you should have let him.”

Ron’s eyes widened with shock, and Neville stopped dead in his tracks.

“You’re not serious, Harry.”

“I don’t want a year of dormitory conflicts, Ron,” Harry said curtly, snapping his trunk closed and pulling off his robes, “and besides, what Seamus doesn’t know won’t hurt him. And you shouldn’t have ripped into him like that – frankly, I’m surprised you did.”

Ron looked as though he was lost for words. Neville swallowed hard before speaking up.

“Harry, eventually, some of this is going to have to come out, and it’d be a hell of a lot better if it was from you.”

“I know, Neville, it’s just —”

“Doesn’t help that the bloody Prophet will be hearing about the Dementors raiding the train,” Ron added bluntly. “That’ll make the front-page tomorrow morning, and considering nobody knew where the hell you were the entire time —”

“Conclusions will be drawn,” Neville finished, his eyes meeting Harry’s. “They’ll start asking questions, and the editorials will start extrapolating... they really were looking for you on the train, weren’t they, Harry?”

“Yes,” Harry growled, his mind filling with a vivid image of the Daily Prophet office going up in flames. “The Hit Wizards have been using the paper, haven’t they?”

Ron exchanged a glance with Neville at the look of fury growing on Harry’s face. “Not explicitly, since the investigation is still mostly confidential —”

“The editorials do their work for them,” Harry spat. “Damn it, I should have seen this coming!”

The door suddenly opened, and Dean Thomas slowly peeked his head inside. He froze at the livid expression on Harry’s face.

“Am I, ah, interrupting something?”

Harry took a heavy breath and tried to get a reign on his temper. Got to keep things cool, can’t give the damned Prophet any more ammunition... “It’s nothing, Dean, you can come in.”

Dean pulled himself inside and sat heavily on his bed. “Ron, you shouldn’t have called Seamus out like that. He was ready to punch you across the face.”

“Let him come,” Ron growled. “He thinks he knows what Harry’s going through —”

“It’s not just that,” Dean said heavily. “Look, Seamus had a rough summer. His dad read one of the articles about Harry escaping from that plane – well, he’s a police officer, and that article put him between a rock and a hard place.”

“Why?”

“Well, there was a bloodstain on the wing of that plane, and nobody could identify it,” Dean said with a wince. “And it doesn’t help that Seamus’ dad went undercover in the IRA when he was younger...”

“What’s that?”

“Irish Republican Army, Neville,” Dean replied with a bit of a shiver. “Don’t know too much about them, but from what my mum’s told me, they’ve done some pretty nasty stuff in the Muggle world...”

“And what does all that have to do with me?” Harry asked with annoyance as he sat on his bed. “I’m not part of some bloody organization –”

“Harry, just listen.” Dean swallowed hard at the grim, expectant expression on Harry’s face. “The IRA killed a lot of people for their cause, and when Seamus’ dad saw the article, all those bad memories came back for him, and he went livid when he heard Seamus was planning on living in the same dorm as you this year. So basically, Seamus spent half the summer arguing with his parents so he could return to Hogwarts... all because of you.”

Ron let out a disgusted snort. “Well, he’s back, isn’t he? Even despite everything he thinks about Harry –”

“Only because his mum gave in and despite her own misgivings convinced his dad,” Dean retorted. “Harry, I’ve barely heard about what happened with you this summer, and frankly, I don’t really care either way, but give Seamus a break, all right? Frankly, maybe it’s best for all of us if he doesn’t sleep up here –”

Harry shook his head with disgust as he slid under his sheets. “Tell him to do whatever the hell he wants. If we both ignore each other, all the better. And he wants out of here, let him leave – he doesn’t need his life to be messed up because of me.”

And with that, before Dean could even speak, Harry turned over and closed his eyes, praying for the cool oblivion of sleep to come all the quicker.

* * *

“Do you even think the Ministry’s bothered to revise the curriculum for History of Magic?” Ron grumbled as he and Harry trudged towards the dungeons. “I mean, I’m all for reading about giant wars, but couldn’t they focus on something a bit more modern and relevant?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “They could, but that would likely mean they’d have to start admitting some of their more obvious mistakes,” he replied with a shrug. “And it’s not like they’d be able to expel Binns from the school, considering how long he’s been teaching History. I get the impression the ghost will be at Hogwarts longer than any of us will.”

Ron looked carefully around the corner before lowering his voice. “Did you actually take any notes in that class?”

Harry shrugged. “A few. Mostly out of the textbook, how the old wizards took the giants they were fighting down without killing themselves. Could come in handy if Voldemort’s –”

“Stop using that name, all right?” Ron interrupted, wincing and looking around nervously.

“Why should I?” Harry asked, his eyes suddenly hard. “We both know he’s back –”

“You just gotta be careful here, Harry,” Ron whispered. “You might have other things to deal with besides You-Know-Who – the whole

Ministry investigation and such – but Lupin warned us that mentioning anything about the Order and such could be very bad. And we don't want to let on to Malfoy or the other potential Death Eaters that we know anything significant... they could change their tactics."

Harry snorted with disgust. "And where was I when Lupin was giving that little lecture?"

"Upstairs, talking with Tonks and Sirius –"

"Figures." Harry's hand clenched into a fist. "And except for the fact that I give Malfoy less credit than the average Flobberworm, it might actually be valid. Although," he added suddenly, his eyes sparking, "if you do hear something that could be valuable to the Order, can you pass it along?"

Ron swallowed. "Harry, I'm not exactly an Order spy here –"

"I know, I know, it's just that I want to be in the loop. No, more than that, I have to be in the loop." Harry turned back towards the corridor, where a line of Slytherin sixth-years were moving heading downstairs and giving Harry very wary looks. "With this investigation, I've got no choice."

"You think HAIT's going to use them to get information on you, like when Rita Skeeter used Malfoy and the other Slytherins?"

Harry frowned. "Hadn't thought of that, but it's a possibility... come on, we should get to Potions before we get any more looks."

"You actually want to get that class?" Ron asked incredulously, hurrying behind Harry.

Harry's eyes blazed with smoldering fury. "Ron, you've got to know your enemy before you strike."

And leaving his friend stock still with shock, he entered the darkened Potions classroom and sat down at his usual table, pulling his potions equipment onto the desk as he watched the door.

Ron's eyes were wide as he quickly sat down beside Harry. "Are you saying you want to –"

"Not now, hush!" Harry hissed, even as Snape strode into the room. In his usual, matte-black robes, the professor crossed to the front of the room and began to speak. But Harry wasn't listening to the professor – his eyes, instead, were trained Snape's movements. He's obviously recovered from when Fluffy bit him, but are there any other weaknesses I can exploit...

"The instructions for the Draught of Peace are on the board," Snape finished, tapping his wand twice on the board. "It is a very difficult potion, and heavy-handedness with the ingredients will prove disastrous to any thick-skulled individuals who think they can easily pass this class. You have one hour – start."

Harry tried to keep his attention on his potion, but his eyes kept flicking up whenever Snape moved throughout the room. Even as his potion began smoking copiously, he kept watching the potions professor for any potential weaknesses. If I can exploit a physical weakness, I have an advantage...

"Harry, your potion!" Ron said urgently, even as he struggled to tend to his own cauldron.

"I can handle it," Harry growled, even as Snape stopped in front of Malfoy's cauldron.

"Malfoy, what is this?"

"The Draught of Peace, professor," Malfoy replied promptly, his eyes snapping up.

"I know what the Draught of Peace is, Malfoy, and this," Snape said curtly, raising a ladle into the potion and scooping up a sample, "is not it. This mess is not to my standards."

Malfoy's eyes were wide, and Ron and Harry exchanged shocked glances – they had never seen Snape get angry with Malfoy like this before. Especially over a potion that Harry guessed was far better than anything his cauldron was spewing out.

Malfoy's face was slowly going red. "Sir, this potion is near perfect, and if you compare it to, let's say, Potter's cauldron, I'm sure you'd find that mine compares favourably –"

Snape's eyes snapped up and met Harry's for a fraction of a second. Harry glared at the professor, his hatred for Snape plain on his face. But then Snape turned back to Malfoy, an ugly expression growing on his face.

"Potter's endeavours with potions are not your concern, Malfoy – nor have they ever been."

"But sir –"

"Why do you even have an interest in his cauldron or Potter at all, Malfoy? Is there something you wish to confess to my class?"

Malfoy's anger was plain to everyone now, and most of the class was watching the argument in stunned silence. "Professor, that's out of –"

Snape's wand snapped out and pointed at Malfoy's potion. "Question my authority one more time, Malfoy, and you will receive no marks for this class. It is not your business if other students are doing poorly in my class, and perhaps if you gave your full effort, you would not be producing substandard potions. Is that understandable?"

"Yes, sir," Malfoy growled through clenched teeth as he turned back to his potion as Snape strode away to berate Lavender Brown on her own potion, which was nearly boiling out of her cauldron.

"Could you... can you believe that he did that?" Ron whispered. "To Malfoy?"

Harry's eyes were narrowed as he studied Snape. "He wouldn't just be ignoring me if he didn't have something to hide. And I know he does."

"But he would never have a go at Malfoy like that, even if his potion was rubbish!" Ron protested. "Harry, do you think..."

"We'll talk about this later," Harry whispered, his eyes still fixed on Snape even as he packed his bags. Why would the notoriously biased professor attack one of his favourite students, without cause? It didn't make sense...

Perfect, he thought darkly, as he filled his flask with potion, left it on the table, and stalked out of the room. Just one more complication that I've got to worry about.

* * *

"This'll have to be quick, Professor," Tonks said sharply as she entered the Headmaster's office. "I've got a lot of work to do, you know."

"Regarding the investigation, I'm assuming," Dumbledore said, gesturing towards the chair opposite the older man's desk. "You have a role in HAIT's investigation?"

"Not a big one, but I'll know what's coming," Tonks replied tersely. "Harry's in more trouble than he's ever been, you know, and given what Umbridge is scheming, things are only going to get worse."

Dumbledore sighed heavily and gestured to the pile of envelopes littering his desk. "The letters from the governors are already coming in, and the notable cancellation in the Prophet's delivery this morning tells us a great deal about what Dolores Umbridge plans to do."

"She contacted Fudge –"

"I know, he made his statement a few hours ago," Dumbledore said grimly, "and the letter he sent me was even less complimentary. He's

pushing for an early, public interrogation of Harry – and given the precariousness of my position as it is, I can do little overtly to stop him.”

Tonks nodded, but the affirmative action did not dislodge the distrust in her gaze. “I understand.”

“Of course,” Dumbledore continued, rising to his feet and moving towards a cabinet against the wall, “Harry has acted unilaterally before, without my knowledge – and given what you told me last night regarding the events on the Hogwarts Express, he will have little compunction continuing to do so, utilizing any aid he can.”

Tonks had an idea where Dumbledore was leading the conversation, but she kept listening. “So what, exactly, do you have planned?”

“Do you have an idea what Dolores Umbridge is planning?”

“She wants the governors on her side, and considering they’re the only thing in her way from asserting more dominance here, it’s a shrewd move on her part. She’s pressing from two fronts – hers and Fudge’s – and it’ll only be a matter of time before they capitulate... unless something can be dredged up that can slow things down. We can’t stop the Prophet, though – they’re going to run all over this.”

“And what about the rest of HAIT?” Dumbledore asked, his walk slowing as he listened intently to Tonks’ words. “Do you know how they plan to assist?”

“She’s choosing the interrogators in a few days, and she’s got Sanders looking into tracking Sirius’ bike –”

“Which you still have not told me from whom you obtained it,” Dumbledore said, looking up and meeting Tonks’ eyes. “Hagrid is on the continent, Miss Tonks – and you well know that despite the fact he was one of the few who saw it last, there was evidence compiled against Sirius that included information only one who possessed the motorbike would have.”

“Evidence only stays on record for so long.”

“Such a record would have been reopened, Miss Tonks, when Sirius escaped from Azkaban,” Dumbledore said softly as he opened a black cabinet and withdrew a basin filled with silvery substance. “There is a missing link, Miss Tonks, and I am genuinely curious how you found the motorbike, particularly as Sirius has refused to divulge any of the plans –”

“Sorry, Professor, but this is between me and Sirius,” Tonks cut him off. “Private, you know...”

Dumbledore let out another deep sigh as he sat down, placing the Pensieve on his desk. For a few seconds, he looked very weary, as if he had seen and done too much. Tonks felt a momentary pang of sympathy – she could only guess the amount of stress the old man was under. Pity neither Harry or I can trust him...

“Miss Tonks,” Dumbledore began after a few seconds of silence, “despite Harry’s efforts to conceal things from me, I suspect that he has done things – some likely illegal and very dangerous – to defend against the Ministry’s encroachments.”

“So have we,” Tonks pointed out, her tone flat. She knew it was pointless denying anything at this point – she knew Dumbledore was going to start connecting the dots eventually. “All of us in the Order have acted illegally. If anything, Harry’s taking his first steps.”

“He is getting into very dangerous territory, dealing with very dangerous men,” Dumbledore continued, as he drew his wand and tapped it to his temple, drawing a long strand of memory from his head and moving it into the Pensieve. “And knowing, ultimately, what he must do, I am concerned for him, and for anyone who he considers a friend.”

“I appreciate your concern, Professor,” Tonks said curtly, her hand spontaneously clenching and unclenching behind her back. “You want to keep him safe – particularly as Lord Voldemort considers him a target.”

“Voldemort is not the only dangerous man seeking ill for Harry,” Dumbledore replied with a measured tone, “and Harry has made enemies – some of whom are Hogwarts even now. And Harry knows this”

“Then what do you want me to do?” Tonks asked roughly, cutting through Dumbledore’s circuitous words. “Protect him, or spy on him?”

“Harry has a right to his privacy,” Dumbledore replied blandly, raising his eyebrows at Tonks’ brusqueness. “I do have his interests at heart, though, and I have no desire to see him go to Azkaban. And despite the fact my options are limited, I will do everything I can to help Harry –”

“Whether he needs it or not,” Tonks said coolly, her eyes flashing. “I understand, Professor, but what, exactly, do you want from me?”

Dumbledore gestured towards the Pensieve. “I will be offering Harry the usage of one of my Pensieves when I speak with him this evening. I’d like for you to convince Harry that it would be a good idea to use it.”

“Pensieves are obscenely expensive,” Tonks said warily, “and there’s no guarantee Harry will accept your offer. You know he, well...”

“He does not have the same trust in me he once did, I know - and that is why I need your help,” Dumbledore said, his quiet voice picking up a tone of urgency. “This interrogation Harry will face will likely include a form of Legilimency that even I won’t be able to restrict. If Harry can remove certain memories from his mind – which will not delete them entirely, of course – the interrogators will find it far more difficult to extract any information from Harry. Will you do this for me?”

Tonks blew out a long, slow breath as she turned towards the door. “You know, Professor, this would be a hell of a lot easier if you were just honest with him, told him everything. He’d trust you, then.”

“I don’t know all the answers, Miss Tonks.”

“But you know enough – and you are hiding things from him.”

“Too much knowledge, Miss Tonks, never makes for simple decisions,” Dumbledore replied heavily. “You and I both know that.”

Tonks met Dumbledore’s eyes for a long few seconds. Then the Auror pulled the door open and left the Headmaster’s Office, slamming the door behind her.

* * *

“We honestly should have dropped Divination while we still had the chance,” Ron grumbled. “What a bloody waste of time. Didn’t stop the old bat from giving us homework, either!”

“I’d be more concerned about Snape’s or Binns’ essay than anything Trelawney’s giving us,” Harry replied, his voice curt. He wasn’t going to deny that he was not looking forward to his next class – particularly given everything Tonks had told him about Umbridge back in Grimmauld Place, how she had been responsible for creating HAIT and bringing it to Hogwarts. “And I’ve got other things to worry about besides homework.”

“What’s the bet Umbridge gives us loads?” Ron asked heavily. “I’m not looking forward to this evening, I can tell you that.”

“Binns’ essay won’t be that bad,” Harry replied with irritation as he slid into the classroom, sitting along the far side by the window.

“Are you kidding?” Ron asked incredulously. “Hermione’s refusing to give me her notes, because she thinks I’ll share them with you. How bloody unfair is that?”

Harry looked over to where Hermione was sitting – near the front, next to Neville. He scowled. “Tell her not to bother; I can handle this

by myself.” And if Tonks was willing to give me a hand, this could go over a hell of a lot smoother...

But his train of thought was cut off, because a few seconds later, Professor Umbridge herself entered the room, a warm smile on her face.

“Good morning, class!” she said loudly, moving to the board at the front of the room.

There were a few, muttered ‘mornings’ from the students, and Harry caught several exasperated glances from the students.

“Tut, tut, that just will not do,” Umbridge said with disapproval. “When I say, ‘Good morning, class,’ I want to hear, ‘Good morning, Professor Umbridge’. Is that clear? So let’s try this again... good morning, class!”

“Good morning, Professor Umbridge,” Harry and the rest of the class replied listlessly.

Umbridge’s eyes darted across the room, focusing on Harry for a few seconds before she tapped twice on the chalkboard with her wand. Words erupted across the board, scrawling a list in curly, cursive writing. It gave Harry the start of a headache even trying to read any of the words.

“So, given that you have had four successive teachers before myself, I and the Ministry are prepared to alleviate the confusion in which you have been taught in previous years by returning to a basic, Ministry-approved curriculum appropriate for this class. You all have copies of William Slinkhard’s Defensive Magical Theory?”

There was a muttered grumble of assent.

“Now, that is not what I’m looking for,” Umbridge said reprovingly, rapping her wand on the desk. “When I ask you a question, I would like a proper answer, such as ‘Yes, Professor Umbridge’, or ‘No, Professor Umbridge’. Is that quite clear? Now, let’s try this again: do

you all have a copy of William Slinkhard's Defensive Magical Theory?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," the class droned. Harry gave Ron an irritated glance, in which Ron returned with a shrug.

"So, wands away, quills out, and please copy down the course aims," Umbridge finished, her smile returning to her toad-like face. "There will be no need to talk. Any questions?"

"I have one," Hermione said loudly.

"Then please raise your hand, Miss..."

"Granger, Professor. Hermione Granger," Hermione said, her eyes defiantly meeting Umbridge's.

"Do you need to visit the ladies' room, Miss Granger?"

"Hardly," Hermione replied, even as some of the class snickered at Umbridge's comment. "I've got a question about the course aims."

"Are they unclear to you?" Umbridge asked sweetly. "Well, give them a few minutes to think them over, and I'm sure they'll make plenty of sense."

"Actually, I don't think that's going to help," Harry spoke up, his voice starkly loud in the quiet classroom.

"I'm sorry, Mister..."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. Is Umbridge actually feigning ignorance here? All right, I can play this game... "It's Potter, Professor. Harry Potter. You might have heard of me once or twice."

"Are the course aims unclear to you as well, Mister Potter?" Umbridge asked, raising a well-manicured eyebrow. "Even for such a bright boy like yourself?"

Flattery, now? Oh, this is interesting... “Yes, Professor, but likely for a different reason than Hermione’s over there.”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll come to you if you think about them for a few minutes –”

“Professor, I can’t read your writing.”

Laughter broke out amongst the class, even as Harry gave a helpless shrug and tapped his glasses. Umbridge, however, was not amused.

“Would you like a seat closer to the front, Mister Potter?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Then I would certainly hope you learn to understand my script before the year ends,” Umbridge finished curtly before turning back to Hermione, whose hand was in the air again. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“I still have a problem with the course aims.”

“They seem perfectly clear to me, Miss Granger.”

“Not to me,” Hermione replied bluntly. “There’s nothing there about using defensive magic.”

Several of the students frowned, some taking second looks at the board. Harry just snorted. He wasn’t surprised, either. If Umbridge is as paranoid as Fudge is, she probably thinks that teaching us any kind of magic would be tantamount to giving the murderer the weapon to kill you with... and I wasn’t really expecting her to teach me magic, anyways... why would she want me to know more magic, if I’m a criminal?

“Are you a Ministry-approved expert in defensive magic, Miss Granger?” Umbridge asked in a sweet voice.

“No, but –”

“Then I would suggest you leave the discussion of the course aims to witches and wizards with more skill and intelligence than you possess,” Umbridge finished with a decisive nod. “This curriculum was drafted by a committee of Ministry-approved experts, and requires only that you study the approved text in order to pass your Ordinary Wizarding Level.”

“So we aren’t going to use magic in the class?” Ron asked incredulously.

“Hand, Mister...”

“Weasley,” Ron said impatiently, but Umbridge had already turned away to address Parvati, who had also raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss...”

“Parvati Patil, and isn’t there a practical bit on our Defense O.W.L.? Are you suggesting that the first time we will actually be casting these spells will be in front of an examiner?”

“As long as you have studied the theory of the magic enough, and the textbook, there should be no reason why you shouldn’t pass the exam,” Umbridge replied dismissively.

“That’s a very big assumption,” Harry whispered to Ron. Umbridge’s eyes fell on Harry again for a split second before moving to Dean, who was waving his hand impatiently at the back of the room.

“Yes, Mister...”

“Dean Thomas, Professor, and I’ve got a question about this textbook here,” Dean said, flipping the book open. “The publication date is fairly recent, and it’s Ministry-approved, so I’m guessing you might know the author, correct?”

“I have had the pleasure of working with Mr. Slinkhard in the past, Mister Thomas,” Umbridge replied with a bit of a smile.

“Then could you tell me what this book is actually all about?” Dean asked with confusion. “I mean, from what I’ve flipped through, there’s practically nothing here about actually casting magic. There are no lists of spells, no discussion of the actual theory behind the magic... it seems, if anything, there’s a lot of writing about wizarding ethics in here. More of that than defense, in any case.”

Umbridge’s eyes suddenly went cold, and her smile vanished. “Are you criticizing the textbook of this course, Mister Thomas?”

“I just don’t understand why we’re using it,” Dean countered. “Forgive me for being stupid or something, but there doesn’t seem to be anything in here that’ll help me pass my O.W.L, and I skimmed through it at lunch.”

“ ’ Well, much as I appreciate your preparatory efforts for this course, Mister Thomas, this is the approved textbook and this will be the one that will be used,” Umbridge finished curtly. “Any more questions?”

“Just one, Professor,” Harry spoke up again, his voice ringing in the class. “If what Dean says is true, will we be discussing modern ethical issues with Slinkhard’s defensive theory and discussing a variable approach to confronting the Dark Arts? You know, with class dialogue and such?”

“Why would such dialogues be necessary, Mister Potter? They are not supported within the curriculum,” Umbridge said, her voice deadly quiet now.

“Well, Slinkhard could be wrong.”

The class gasped, while Ron gave Harry an amazed look, as if he couldn’t believe what Harry was saying. Umbridge, on the other hand, was looking as if she was having a bit of difficulty controlling her temper.

“Are you suggesting you might be more right than a Ministry-approved expert, Mister Potter?”

“Not at all,” Harry replied with a smirk and a shrug. “I’m just saying that if this text really is an ethical discourse, as Dean’s saying, then we should at least discuss it openly, instead of just assuming that it’s right or useful. And considering that it is only theory, shouldn’t we at least discuss it and its relevance to real-world issues?”

Ron gave Harry a nervous look. “Harry…”

“Ron, not now,” Harry muttered, his eyes still fixed on Umbridge, who was looking at Harry with a new, calculating expression, as if she was analyzing him as an opponent instead of just a student.

“Potter, who is teaching this class?”

“You are, Professor, it’s just that –”

“And are you questioning that I am not qualified to teach this class?”

“Not at all, Professor, but –”

“Are you questioning the Ministry of Magic’s actions in the direction of this curriculum?”

Harry knew that any answer he gave to that question would not be pleasant, so he kept silent.

“Potter, realize that unlike your own personal delusions, you are not always right,” Umbridge said, her voice cool now as she approached Harry’s desk. “And while you are in this classroom, I am the professor, and you are the student. I have neither the time nor the patience to listen to dialogues perpetrated by students who have neither the intellect nor the qualifications nor the education to begin such diatribes. Five points from Gryffindor, Potter, and return to your reading.”

But Harry had stopped listening. Getting to his feet, he slid his book into his bag, carefully capped his ink bottle, and tucked away his quill.

“Harry, don’t do this!” Hermione exclaimed loudly, but Harry ignored her.

“Potter, what do you think you’re doing?” Umbridge said, her high girlish voice even louder than Hermione’s.

“I’m leaving,” Harry replied shortly. “It’s obvious I’m not going to learn anything – or rather, there’s no potential for me to learn anything in this class, so I’m not going to waste my time and yours in here.”

“Potter, get back here this instant! Detention, this evening, with me, and twenty points from Gryffindor –”

Harry snorted with disgust. “You can’t stop me, and I’ve got better things to do with my time than go to your detentions.” He wrenched the door open to the gasps of the class.

He turned back for a few seconds. “And you know something? I wasn’t lying, either – I really couldn’t read your writing.” Then, with a wave to the class, he slammed the door shut behind him, completely ignoring Umbridge’s furious shouts as he headed down the corridor, a relieved feeling settling in his gut.

* * *

The relieved feeling was gone hours later, and Harry missed it as he climbed up the moving staircase, a note clenched tightly in his hands. Nervousness and anticipation were seething in his stomach instead, blended together by cold satisfaction and hot anger. It was only a matter of time before he confronted me... well, at least I have a cast-iron excuse to avoid Umbridge’s detention...

He reached to pull the griffon knocker, but Dumbledore’s voice emerged from the other side of the door before Harry’s hand even touched the brass.

“Come in, Harry.”

He took a deep breath instead. I can do this... he's the one who needs to give an explanation this time, not me. His hand closed around the handle and turned.

The door creaked open, once again revealing the glittering, magical room where Dumbledore made his home. The Headmaster was sitting behind his desk, and for a second Harry couldn't recognize the expression on his face. But as he stepped inside and closed the door, he saw it: weariness. Dumbledore's eyes, once filled with an ever-present twinkle, were weary, the twinkle sparse in the dim light of the room.

“You wanted to see me, Professor?” Harry asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“Please sit down, Harry, if you will,” Dumbledore said quietly, gesturing towards the chair. Harry cautiously sat down and waited for Dumbledore to speak. The office was surprisingly quiet – the portraits did not make a sound, and Harry couldn't even hear Fawkes' trill within the circular room.

“Where's Fawkes, Professor?” he asked with a frown.

“If a warning is needed, if a certain professor or other visitors of our school discover that you are not where you're supposed to be, Fawkes will provide it,” Dumbledore replied simply.

Wonderful. He knows about today already. “So you know about what happened in her class today.”

“Professor Umbridge was most displeased with your behavior,” Dumbledore replied, pulling several slips of paper out from his desk. “She made this very clear over dinner, and I find it very likely that the Minister for Magic discovers your action.”

“I don't regret it.”

“It was unwise, Harry, and it could damage your case,” Dumbledore said reprovingly. “It may prove difficult to respect Dolores Umbridge –”

“I’ll respect her when she deserves it,” Harry spat, “and she’s a long way from earning that respect. I don’t care if she’s a professor – she doesn’t deserve that position either.”

“And what allows you to make that judgment, Harry?” Dumbledore asked, his voice quite bland.

“You didn’t choose her,” Harry said coldly. “You know better than anyone that she’s not qualified. Hell, the only reason she has the position is because of HAIT and the Ministry.”

“Which are both forces to be reckoned with,” Dumbledore replied. “And considering they are both in charge of your interrogation, you cannot afford to antagonize –”

“Wait a minute, hold back a second, what interrogation?” Harry interrupted. “I wasn’t informed about any of this!”

Dumbledore sighed. “Harry, your actions above the train were noted, and Professor Umbridge is determined that you will face some sort of Ministry inquiry. It was only through a stroke of luck that we managed to confine the interrogation to Hogwarts, to be carried out by HAIT members. Then, if any evidence is amassed to point to your collaboration with the Ollivanders’ bombing –”

“Which I had nothing to do with, by the way,” Harry growled.

“I believe you, Harry, but many do not, particularly considering the recent statement that the Minister for Magic delivered in the Daily Prophet,” Dumbledore replied seriously, gesturing towards the paper on his desk. “I assume you saw the post owls at dinner?”

“So that’s why the Prophet wasn’t delivered this morning,” Harry muttered, cursing under his breath. “Just so Fudge could get his bit in!”

“He was informed early this morning, so he could have time to prepare a statement,” Dumbledore said grimly. “Furthermore, he and Professor Umbridge are putting pressure upon the school governors to allow a public hearing, with as little of my ‘interference’ as possible. They want the Prophet to witness the hearing – and any witches or wizards who would want to listen, and that number is quite high. Worst of all, they are pressing for this hearing to be held at Hogwarts.”

“But surely you can restrict that –”

“My administrative powers, Harry, are already being diminished in whatever way they can be,” Dumbledore said seriously. “And any overt interference could prove disastrous, even resulting in my removal from Hogwarts.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. He hadn’t expected this. “They wouldn’t dare – not here –”

“Fudge’s letter has already made his intentions clear,” Dumbledore murmured, pulling an official sheaf of parchment out from under a stack of papers on his desk. “He would view any attempt to intervene on your behalf as just cause for charges of obstruction of justice.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry snarled. “You’ve got to be bloody kidding me!”

“This is no joke, Harry, unfortunately.” Dumbledore sighed. “And I cannot afford to leave Hogwarts yet, it is still far too early.”

“So I’m going to have to face a public interrogation? Alone?” Harry asked incredulously. “Don’t I get, I don’t know, a lawyer or something?”

“That is one of the few things we can use to delay your hearing, Harry, but it will not be enough,” Dumbledore replied. “I will try to delay the proceedings the best I can, but I cannot stop the Ministry – not this time.” Dumbledore’s eyes finally met Harry’s. “Of course, you’re becoming rather used to taking matters into your own hands, Harry.”

So he knows. Damn it all, he figured things out. “No use feigning ignorance now, is there?” Harry growled, getting to his feet. “I did what I had to do.”

“You acted with a degree of intelligence and cunning I have never seen before in you, Harry,” Dumbledore replied steadily. “You even managed to deceive me, something I hadn’t ever expected. Even now, I do not know the full extent of your actions.”

“But you intend to find out,” Harry snapped.

“No, I do not.”

Harry was stunned speechless. “What?”

“Harry, despite the fact that you were likely involved in events that I would likely not condone, we cannot turn back the clock. Where I cannot interfere, you might be able to. And in the end, we both have the same goals, particularly in regards to the final elimination of Voldemort, who I suspect will become much more active in the confusion surrounding this hearing.”

“So you want me to handle this... on my own?” Harry could hardly believe the words he was hearing. This isn’t like Dumbledore at all – he’s let me solve problems before, but not like this...

“You have allies, Harry, even some I’m likely not aware of,” Dumbledore replied, the familiar twinkle flickering back in his eyes for a few seconds before the old man’s expression turned sad, almost wistful. “I could only wish you could consider me as one.”

“You don’t trust me, Professor,” Harry replied bitingly. “And trust has to be both ways. And considering that you refused to train me, I’ve had to do things on my own from the start –”

“Harry, surely you can understand now why I refused,” Dumbledore replied quietly. “The Ministry would likely discover my involvement and would interfere. I would certainly not be allowed to remain at Hogwarts.”

“So you’re suggesting I should never have come back here?”

“Harry, with Voldemort and his agents active again, Hogwarts is one of the safest places for you –”

“Only while you’re here,” Harry pointed out.

“Making a move towards Hogwarts would draw Voldemort into the open, and at this time, he does not have the manpower to support such a development,” Dumbledore said, rising to his feet. “So we have a bit of time, at least.”

“Doesn’t change the fact you don’t trust me,” Harry replied coolly, folding his arms across his chest. “Why you only tell me part of the truth – if that at all.”

“You’re referring, I presume, to the Potter accounts.”

“That, and a bunch of other things that I want to know that you won’t tell me,” Harry snapped. But then he paused. “Wait... how did you know I discovered the Potter accounts?”

“Lupin informed me that you had somehow found out about their existence,” Dumbledore replied heavily. “Unfortunately, Harry, only four people know the entire extent of that nightmare. Two are dead, one is in Azkaban, and one is...”

“At this school,” Harry finished, a dangerous edge creeping into his voice. “Snape was involved in that mess, Lupin told me that much.

And you let that treasonous bastard still teach at this school after he betrayed my parents and sealed my family vaults –”

“Harry, even I don’t know the details in what happened with those vaults,” Dumbledore replied seriously. “Professor Snape has refused to divulge anything to me or to anyone else.”

“He doesn’t deserve to teach at this school,” Harry spat. He left his other thoughts unspoken: he deserves to die.

“Harry, that is not fair,” Dumbledore said sharply. “Until you know the entire extent of one’s actions, you cannot judge –”

Harry’s eyes blazed. “I can sure as hell judge Snape for what he did. He betrayed my parents to Voldemort, and you still let that traitorous bit of filth –”

“Enough, Harry!” Dumbledore said, his voice cutting off Harry’s in mid-word. “I can understand, and even tolerate to a degree your disrespect for Professor Umbridge, but I trust Severus Snape, and I am well aware of his failings. However, although you might not realize it, it is in our best interests that he is to be kept safe and viable. His information is vital to the Order, and to our efforts, so I would ask that you refrain from taking any action against him.”

“I’m not promising that,” Harry growled. “And that’s the most you’re getting out of me. Is there anything else, Professor?”

Dumbledore held Harry’s gaze for a long few seconds before sighing and pulling a heavy basin out from under his desk. Harry immediately recognized it.

“I would you like you to have this, Harry,” Dumbledore said, sliding the Pensieve towards him. “If I cannot directly interfere in your interrogation, I will do whatever I can to aid you personally.”

“And how is a Pensieve going to help?” Harry asked skeptically, eyeing the empty bowl.

“Harry, throughout the course of the interrogation, some of those questioning you may attempt to use a magic called Legilimency,” Dumbledore replied seriously. “It is a form of magical invasion of the mind, allowing one skilled in its art to sift through one’s memories to find what they desire. However, if only a vague imprint of the memory remains, it would prove much more difficult to find.”

“So you want me to use the Pensieve... to store my memories?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. “Do you honestly think that will work?”

“ It will certainly make their interrogation far more difficult,” Dumbledore replied, a small twinkle returning to his eyes. “The rest, Harry, I leave in your very capable hands, and I wish you good luck.”

“Merlin knows I’ll need it,” Harry muttered.

* * *

Tonks waited carefully, her eyes trained on the end of the corridor. If her luck was good, any second Harry would emerge from the shadows, and Tonks would be able to talk to him privately. She knew that she hadn’t left Harry a destination in her little note, but she had seen Harry receive the note from Dumbledore, and hiding under the Disillusionment Charm, she had carefully watched him ascend the tower. It wasn’t midnight yet, but she could catch him early, all the better.

Finally, after a long period of fidgeting, she saw him. He was moving quickly, but she expected that. After all, it was late, and Harry needed to get back to the Gryffindor dormitory before he was caught for being out of bed.

Taking a deep breath, she reached out and grabbed a hold of his sleeve.

Harry started, his wand dropping to his hand as he attempted to wrench himself free –

“Relax, Harry, it’s just me.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Reveal yourself!”

Tonks sighed with exasperation as she dispelled the charm. “Still as paranoid as always, it seems.”

“Who says I’m paranoid?”

“Everyone who has seen, heard, or talked to you in the past couple of weeks,” Tonks replied conversationally. “But don’t worry – I’ve heard it makes for great sex.”

“Oh would you shut up about that?” Harry asked, his face going red. “You don’t have to make those remarks every bloody time I’m around, do you?”

Tonks mimed thinking about this for a second before nodding decisively. “I think I do.”

“Why? It’s mortifying!”

“And it’s unbelievably entertaining for me to watch,” Tonks finished with a smirk. “So how did the meeting with Dumbledore go?”

Harry quickly motioned towards an abandoned classroom. The two slipped inside and with a wave of his wand, Harry locked the door.

“He told me about HAIT’s interrogation.”

Tonks winced. “So you know about that now?”

“Are you going to be on the interrogation team?”

“I doubt it. Umbridge will probably overlook me and choose some older Auror. Kingsley’s likely going to be on the committee, though.”

“Bloody wonderful,” Harry growled. “Dumbledore didn’t mention that part!”

“It’s not confirmed yet, so don’t get your knickers twisted,” Tonks replied steadily. “Hell, it’s not like HAIT’s giving him a lot of information either – at least not some areas. He’s relying on me and Kingsley to get what he can.”

“Can’t he magically eavesdrop? I mean, this is Hogwarts, and it is his school, after all.”

“I thought so, but apparently he can’t break through the magic that Umbridge uses – and even if he tries, she’ll know immediately.” Tonks snorted. “Harry, he’s only human.”

“A damn pity,” Harry muttered, thinking fast. “He basically told me that I was on my own here – and that means he knows most of what we’ve done.”

“We expected that things would come out –”

“And at least he’s keeping his mouth shut,” Harry finished darkly. “The goblins, I bet, would pay dearly to find out how we compromised their security. Are they still investigating what happened?”

“We really wounded their pride when you broke in,” Tonks said with an incredulous nod. “I don’t think I’ve seen them this distrustful since the whole Bagman issue a few months ago.”

Harry sighed and turned towards the window. “So now what do we do? I know that I can’t stop this interrogation, and Merlin knows that Scrimgeour won’t help us, considering that we blackmailed him last time... do you have any ideas?”

Tonks frowned and scratched her temples. “Harry, I honestly don’t see how we can interfere much without breaking some major laws –”

“I don’t have a problem breaking the law,” Harry interrupted.

“Well, I know that,” Tonks replied with irritation, “but this time if you’re talking about blackmailing the school governors, that’s a lot bigger group with more power than Rufus Scrimgeour –”

“And how on earth can the Hogwarts school governors have more power than the Auror Head of Staff?”

“I’m talking about money now, Harry,” Tonks replied seriously. “Prestige, power... all those things that the school governors have in spades. Don’t forget, Lucius Malfoy used to be a governor before he abused his power and was thrown out. And there’s twelve of them... you won’t be able to blackmail all of them without getting found out –”

“Some of them, though, are likely behind Dumbledore,” Harry said sharply, beginning to pace in the room. “And some the Ministry will likely buy off... it’s the ones in the middle I have to worry about.”

“Harry, the ‘ones in the middle’ are likely some of the most powerful witches and wizards you’ve ever dealt with, with more money than Lucius Malfoy could ever amass,” Tonks warned. “I’m talking about wizards that have international stakes. Some might not even be in the country right now.”

“If these wizards are so powerful, then why on earth would they be school governors?” Harry asked with a frown. “And how on earth could Malfoy order them around three years ago?”

“Harry, half of that group retired over the past few years,” Tonks pointed out with a helpless expression. “The new governors are much stronger – and much smarter. As for why they took the positions... Harry, it’s another title they can add to their names, and it’s a chance for them to influence one of the greatest magical educational facilities in Europe. Of course they’re going to be involved, particularly considering supporting Hogwarts is a great opportunity for ‘philanthropy.’ Hell, Malfoy ran with that idea for years!”

Harry took a deep breath. “All right, so I can’t control the entire game board, but there are some things I can use here. Can you get me a list of the current governors and their ‘stance’ right now?”

Tonks smirked. "Umbridge is already putting together a list just like it – I can nick that and copy it without any problems."

"Good, good..." Harry turned back towards the window. "And I need a way to get in contact with Sirius."

Tonks swallowed hard. "Harry, that won't be as easy as it sounds. Umbridge is planning on monitoring all the communication going in and out of Hogwarts –"

"What about those mirrors?" Harry asked suddenly. "Can we use those?"

"There's only two of them, Harry, and if you want to stay in contact with me..."

Harry swore. "Is there any way Sirius can get more?"

"He won't be able to move around openly, Harry," Tonks said with frustration. "I mean, I'll still contact him, but this isn't going to be easy by any stretch of the mind. And we'll need a hell of a lot of planning to make this work."

"Not as easy as breaking into Gringotts, right?" Harry asked with a hint of a smile.

"Definitely not," Tonks muttered, even as she looked at her watch. "Damn, it's getting late. You want me to take you back to Gryffindor Tower?"

"I think I can handle it," Harry replied, shouldering his bag – which Tonks noted seemed suspiciously heavy.

"Did you take the Pensieve Dumbledore offered you?"

Harry nodded. "It could come in handy, you never know."

"Are you actually beginning to trust him?"

Harry gave her a hard look. "Are you?"

Tonks closed her eyes. "Like it or not, I think it'll take a lot more than a Pensieve for me to ever trust Dumbledore like I used to."

"Then we share similar viewpoints," Harry finished brusquely, moving towards the door.

"Wait!"

"What?"

"I remembered something!"

"What, Tonks?"

A sly smile crept across her face. "You still owe me money."

"Oh, for the love of... do you actually want it?"

Tonks gave him a mockingly serious look. "Aurors aren't paid half as well as we should be, Harry. Hand it over."

"And I thought you were just trying to convey subliminal messages in that damned note," Harry muttered even as he pulled his money bag out and counted out the Galleons.

"Am I the kind of girl to convey subliminal messages?" Tonks asked with an audacious wink. "Trust me, Harry, when I want you to know something, you'll know."

Harry slid the money across towards Tonks and sighed. "I'm actually beginning to run out of money, and considering I didn't get a chance to get into Gringotts..."

"We'll deal with it later, Harry," Tonks said seriously. "But I've got to get back on duty. Good night, Harry!"

And with a muttered word and a tap with her wand, she Disillusioned herself and vanished from Harry's sight.

* * *

The room seems a lot darker when Tonks isn't here, Harry thought as he slowly crept out of the classroom. Doesn't help a lot of the torches are out... damn, it is dark here...

He began moving down the hall, each step echoing menacingly. His eyes scanned the walls – somehow, he expected that somehow, he wasn't even alone –

It erupted from the wall, a glimmering shadow with a horrifyingly wide smile and glinting eyes. Harry could barely hold back his yelp of surprise at the appearance of –

“Oh, did I scare you, Potter?” Peeves asked, his smile hardly dimming.

Harry growled with exasperation. “Leave me alone, Peeves.”

“You see, that kind of attitude is not very friendly, Harry,” Peeves remarked, his ghostly smile never dimming. “I can call you Harry, I presume?”

“I don't see why you'd care,” Harry said with a snort, moving around the poltergeist and continuing down the hall.

“You see, there's so many potential nicknames that you can use with names like Harry,” Peeves continued, zooming after Harry before coming up alongside of him. “You want a list of examples?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I'm sure you'd find some of them quite interesting-”

Harry's patience was already strained. “Look, what the hell do you want, Peeves? Just leave me alone, already, or I'll get the Baron!”

Peeves did something odd, then. He cocked his ghostly head to the side and moved closer to Harry. "And what," the ghost asked in a sly tone, "makes you think I care about what the Baron thinks?"

"He's the only one you'll listen to," Harry spat. "Unfortunately. So get the hell out of my –"

"Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah," Peeves said, raising a finger right in Harry's path. "I really don't think you want to be leaving this conversation quite so soon."

"You're going to say nothing that I want to hear."

"Oh, I might just beg to differ," Peeves said, his smile growing ever wider. Harry's eyes narrowed – this wasn't like the poltergeist, to make foreboding comments like this. The ghost even looked a bit different, his incorporeal eyes more hallowed, his face thinner, his grin more twisted...

"What do you want, Peeves?" Harry growled.

"I just think you might want to hear that a little something special is happening in Hogwarts, something that hasn't happened in a very long time," Peeves replied in an off-key singsong voice. "It really might be something you ought to know."

"Then spill it."

Peeves laughed now, and his cackle made Harry step back. There was madness in that cackle... something evil that hadn't been there before. But what could change a ghost, even a poltergeist, like this?

"No, no, no, Harry, you see, that's not how the game works," Peeves said, raising a hand with a sly smile. "And right now, we're all pieces on that board – even you. And right now, our mutual friend is about to flip that board right over to start a whole new game." The poltergeist's smile grew knowing. "And you know exactly who our little friend is."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. "You're saying – you're implying –"

"Ah, ah, ah, must not be making such accusations without enough evidence, Harry," Peeves remarked, wagging a reproving finger. "Must be sure, Harry, must be sure."

"What's he doing, Peeves? What's he doing?"

"Now that, I think," the poltergeist said slowly, "would be telling, now, wouldn't it?"

"Peeves, I swear, if you're –"

"Harry, what you and dear little Albus don't realize is that the chips... well, they're already down. The bet's been placed, and the flop's been laid." Peeves' smile grew dark again. "And as the boundaries go down, all these little people... they'll eat each other. You'll see."

Harry took a steadying breath. "I'll take this to Dumbledore, Peeves, I swear I will –"

"Go ahead, Harry, go ahead and try," Peeves said with a wink. "But he's never been able to get rid of me, or the rest of them. He's tried, everyone has, but you can't get rid of a guy like me, Harry. I'm special, that way."

"What are you?" Harry whispered.

"Me?" Peeves asked, his eyes gleaming with a malevolence that Harry had never seen before. "I'm ahead of the curve, Harry. I'm an agent of chaos... and Hogwarts... well, she's already there."

And with a long, echoing cackle that made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand up, Peeves dove through the floor, leaving Harry alone in the darkness.

Author's Notes: my only commentary here is that my muse was extremely kind to me, and this chapter came extremely easy - which is a bit shocking, considering the length. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“Larshall, do you have a minute?” Sanders asked bluntly as he shoved his way into the secluded classroom corner. Larshall sighed heavily and placed the copy of the Daily Prophet he had been reading back on the desk. He didn’t expect to get anymore reading done, particularly with the sour expression on Sanders’ face.

“Not especially, but you’re not going to leave until I hear you out, so start talking.”

“You’re a hard man to find, you know,” Sanders grunted, sitting on one of the unused desks.

“Dumbledore did say we have free run of the castle, and as long as we don’t interfere with any classes, we are allowed to use the unused classrooms –”

“So you just had to go to the most out-of-the-way room of the lot now, did you?” Sanders replied with a snort. “Honestly, sometimes I can’t believe you weren’t sorted into Ravenclaw back when we were here.”

“Hufflepuff suited me just fine, thanks,” Larshall replied stiffly. “Now what do you want? From the looks of the Prophet, you haven’t turned up any new information about Black’s whereabouts.”

“I have people combing these mountains looking for him, for your information,” Sanders growled, “and Black’s been in hiding for a long time. He’ll be a tough one to find, particularly considering the... difficulties we’ve been having.”

“You can speak freely here,” Larshall replied bluntly, absent-mindedly drawing his wand and dragging it across the desk. “We know that the Aurors are being uncooperative little shits about this whole mess.”

“It helps, at least, that Shacklebolt’s here,” Sanders said, getting up and beginning to pace. “I mean, he’ll at least be open with the information that he knows. Problem is, since he took the position on H.A.I.T., he can’t say much about the Auror investigation or he risks breaking investigation confidentiality.” He shook his head. “And one could only guess what they’re hiding.”

“Oh, come on, you’re saying that the Aurors are hiding valuable information about Black that could –”

“That confiscated motorbike went missing from the evidence files, and so did all the paperwork regarding it,” Sanders spat. “And something that big doesn’t just go missing, Reed. Somebody took it – somebody inside the Auror Office.”

“You’re getting as bad as Kemester here,” Larshall said tiredly, rubbing his eyes. Too much was going on, and he hadn’t been getting nearly enough sleep recently. “And I’ve heard his wilder theories about what Black’s really up to. Hell, I don’t know what to believe now.”

“Speaking of Kemester, how is that rat-bastard son of a bitch?” Sanders growled. “Haven’t seen much of him, recently.”

Larshall groaned with exasperation. “He hasn’t been talking much to anyone. He’s just been spending a lot of time in the Hogwarts library, looking through a bunch of old papers and moldy books nobody gives a damn about.”

“At least he’s not causing trouble,” Sanders muttered. “And given how close he is to Potter... well, it’s only a matter of time before something explodes.”

“Kemester’s already told me that he’s not going to interfere in H.A.I.T.’s investigation,” Larshall replied tiredly.

“He told you that?” Sanders’ voice was skeptical. “Really?”

“What, you think he’s lying to me now?”

“I think he’s telling you what you want to hear,” Sanders said curtly, sitting back down on the desk. “And it’s a damn shame you’re so straight up and down to not see it.”

“See what?” Larshall was starting to get irritated now. “Are you calling me stupid?”

“Just listen, all right? Kemester’s a head case, Larshall, and we’ve both seen his psych profile after that inquiry to confirm that. He has difficulties controlling his anger, and he makes rash judgments. It’s too out of character for him just to sit back and watch as H.A.I.T. investigates this.”

“So you think he’s just acting.”

“I think he’s telling you what you want to hear so you can put in a good word for him and Umbridge can put him on the interrogation team,” Sanders replied grimly. “And knowing Umbridge, she’d probably put him on just to spite Dumbledore.”

“Oh come on, that’s ridiculous. She can’t show that kind of obvious bias, the Wizengamot would have a fit about it. And she knows that if she wants H.A.I.T. to have any vestige of legitimacy in the public eye, it has to at least be fair.”

Sanders cocked an eyebrow. “This is Dolores Umbridge we’re talking about, Reed. You think she gives a damn about being fair?”

“She’ll put Shacklebolt on the interrogation team, I’ll bet.”

“Yeah, but not doing so would just be moronic. Considering Shacklebolt’s background with Black, it only makes sense to have him there.”

“Fair enough, but I still don’t think that Umbridge will put Kemester on the team anyways. She knows he’s a hothead as much as we do. And she knows as well as anybody that he’s uncontrollable.”

“But who else is she supposed to pick from the Hit Wizards, Reed? I’m occupied with the Black investigation, and I wouldn’t trust Lassion or Barkley with a job like this. And she probably thinks you’re too level-headed to be of use to her.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Larshall replied sarcastically.

“Her only real choice, right now, is Kemester,” Sanders finished, “and that’s why I need a favour from you. Two favours, actually.”

Larshall cocked an eyebrow. “Oh really? Don’t you owe me favours, Sanders, for all those shifts I took for you?”

“This is more important than that, Larshall,” Sanders snapped, a flush creeping into his face as he bent closer and lowered his voice. “I want you to be the Hit Wizard representative on the H.A.I.T. interrogation team, not Kemester.”

Larshall’s eyes went wide. “I’m hardly qualified –”

“Qualified enough for this.”

Larshall snorted. “Yeah, compare Kemester’s sterling record with a shitload of arrests and convictions to my record, which is only impressive for its utter blandness, and I’m sure Umbridge will find me a better choice. I’m not an interrogator, Sanders, you know that!”

Sanders clenched a fist. “Listen to me, Larshall, we can’t – and I’m speaking for other Hit Wizards here – have Kemester represent us on that team. He’s volatile, unstable, and anything he says will reflect on us. The last thing we need is a bad reputation, which we’re well on our way to having, thanks to that goddamned inquiry. People are going to start asking questions if Kemester heads this up.”

“Try convincing Umbridge of that – or the Prophet. Hell, they’re probably going to want Kemester on the team simply because he’s at least accessible to them. They like him.”

“Probably because his investigation and that damned inquiry gave them a shitload of headlines to work with,” Sanders growled. “He shouldn’t be on that interrogation, Larshall, and he’s not the only one.”

“There’s no way we’re going to be able to prevent Umbridge from leading –”

“I’m not talking about Umbridge!” Sanders snapped. “I’m talking about Snape. You and I both remember him from Hogwarts, don’t you?”

“And...”

“And what? You know what he’s like!”

“And from everything that we’ve heard, he hates Potter as much as Kemester does,” Larshall replied coolly, picking up his paper. “Just what Umbridge wants.”

“But why would Dumbledore place a teacher on the interrogation committee who is bound to sympathize with us and want Potter facing trial?” Sanders pursued, slamming his fist into his palm with frustration. “It doesn’t make any bloody sense! He has to have some sort of ulterior motive here!”

“He could just be trying to placate Umbridge –”

“And why on earth would Dumbledore try and do that?” Sanders snarled. “The old man’s got more brains than that! He doesn’t need to placate Umbridge!”

“He might be trying to salvage his relations with the Ministry,” Larshall reasoned. “After all, the Minister’s planning on meeting him personally this afternoon in the Three Broomsticks.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Sanders said suspiciously. “Was that in the Prophet this morning?”

“Four or five pages in. They are supposedly discussing Potter and the interrogation – which reminds me, has anybody seen fit to limit that boy’s movements, or at least have him watched? He is a potential suspect.”

“We don’t have the manpower – at least not yet – and I only can imagine the controversy that would present – and the editorials. The parent’s will be protesting that ‘the privacy of their youth is being invaded’ or some bullshit like that –”

“They have a point.”

“Not enough of one,” Sanders snapped. “We’d be doing this for their protection – and considering how volatile Potter is, we’ve got plenty of just cause.”

“Still, best not to risk it, at least not until we have Umbridge’s explicit permission,” Larshall said seriously. “And I mean that, Sanders, don’t even try.”

Sanders huffed. “So are you going to help me then, Reed, with my other requests?”

Larshall sighed, rubbing his temple as a headache began to throb beneath his fingers. “I do what I can, Sanders, but I can’t guarantee results. And you know I can’t control Kemester.”

“You’ve got the best chance of all of us,” Sanders replied curtly, moving towards the door. “At least he listens to you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Larshall muttered, as Sanders left the room. Dmitri Kemester only answers to one person – and that’s Dmitri Kemester.

* * *

“Come in, Draco.”

Draco Malfoy’s eyes were burning as he entered the room, breathing very quickly, as if he was trying to control his temper. “You summoned me, Professor?”

“I did,” Snape said coolly, lightly turning the page of the book placed next to the stack of papers on his desk. “I wished to discuss something quite important with you while you have a few spare moments.”

“This is my lunch period.”

“And perhaps you should be planning on skipping it more often, if this is the quality of work you’re going to be handing me,” Snape snarled, pulling a paper off the top of the file and shoving it to Malfoy. The young man only needed one glance at the paper to see Snape’s reasoning – a large, jagged ‘P’ was scribbled across the top.

“What is this?” Malfoy demanded.

“Your moonstone essay,” Snape growled as he slowly withdrew two more papers from the stack. “And these are Zabini’s and Nott’s. You can have the pleasure of delivering them.”

“I know what these are!” Malfoy snapped. “A ‘Poor’, Professor? Did you happen to mix my essay up with Potter’s?”

“Potter at least scraped a pass,” Snape replied icily, “which is more than I can say for you, Draco. Frankly, I’m disgusted I even graded this, and you should be ashamed to have written your name on it.”

Colour was flooding into Malfoy’s face. “Sir –”

“You’re slipping, Malfoy!” Snape snarled, slamming a hand on his desk as he slowly rose to his full height. “And so are your other coconspirators – oh yes, don’t think that the Dark Lord has kept me ignorant. I’m here to keep a ready eye, in case something goes wrong. Your father specifically requested it.”

Malfoy’s pale eyes blazed with rage as he stepped closer, his voice lowering. “It’s nearly in place, Professor, and as soon as the final lock is tripped –”

“Weren’t you listening when the Dark Lord gave you this assignment?” Snape hissed dangerously. “Tripping the locks will be the simplest thing, Draco! Control, on the other hand –”

“We’ll follow the Dark Lord’s plan,” Malfoy cut him off, his voice barely above a whisper, but Snape could hear the bitterness in his voice. It appears he needs... convincing. A shame – I actually thought he was smarter than this...

With a deftness born from years of practice, Snape reached across the desk and seized the front of Malfoy’s robes with one hand, pulling him close.

“Listen very carefully, Draco,” Snape growled. “What you three are dealing with is dangerous beyond anything that many have seen at Hogwarts. Not even the famed monster of Slytherin can compare to this insidious threat. And that means,” he lowered his voice even further, to barely above a whisper, “you must follow the Dark Lord’s instructions to the letter.”

“I know what I’m –”

“Shut up, Draco, and listen! You’re not in command of this operation, and the Dark Lord has a very specific reason for that – namely that you’re not expendable. The Dark Lord does not care about your avarice – he requires that you follow his commands, and you are not to let your ego get in the way!” Snape shoved Malfoy back. “And in the end, you will be very grateful you are not the one in command.”

“Then why aren’t you talking to him, then?” Malfoy challenged.

“Calling upon a favoured student is an easy way to avoid suspicion, Draco, you know this,” Snape replied, his voice suddenly taking a hard edge. “Of course, avoiding suspicion also means keeping your grades to their usual standards. Your friends as well.”

“I understand,” Malfoy muttered through gritted teeth. “Sir.”

“Watch it, Draco,” Snape said sharply, his eyes glittering. “The last thing we need is for you to be exposed. The fact the Dark Lord is attempting this under Dumbledore’s nose is one thing – but with H.A.I.T., it’s a different Quidditch game entirely. And that means absolute secrecy, and no mistakes. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“One more thing, Draco.”

Malfoy turned, resentment and disgust mixing on his face as he looked up at his Professor. “Yes?”

“You and I both know that Professor Umbridge’s course will be completely useless through the course of this year. Please make sure that you do learn enough to pass your O.W.L. After all,” Snape added with a grim expression, “the Dark Lord does not tolerate useless Death Eaters.”

* * *

“So, you have the list?” Harry asked eagerly as Tonks pulled the door shut behind her.

“Enough of one, yes, and the one message I managed to sneak to Sirius gave me a bit more information,” Tonks replied quickly, unrolling a tightly wound scroll and nailing it to the table with two jabs of her wand. “What you’re about to see is highly confidential, Harry,

and you definitely don't want to let on to anybody that you know what I'm showing you."

"Got it," Harry said, leaning close to read the names. "You colour-coded the entire thing?"

"Hey, I needed something to do on those debriefings when Sanders is droning on and on about how he's not able to find Sirius in the mountains," Tonks retorted, tapping the paper twice, causing the colours to dance and shimmer. "I've developed a sort of spectrum here, with green representing the governors we know won't support us, and red representing the one who are on our side. And with a simple charm," she added, tapping the list again, causing the names to shift so quickly that Harry couldn't even follow their motion, "I can rearrange them in order."

"Nifty," Harry said with a grin as he looked closer. With a sinking feeling in his gut, he noticed that there seemed to be more names in the 'green' than in the 'red'. "There's that many people against me? Already?"

"Four out of twelve we won't be able to touch, Harry," Tonks replied with a weary shake of her head. "Two are Ministry sympathizers with positions close to Fudge, recipients of some very big government grants for their projects. They'll stick like pustules to Fudge. And those two – Felix Nott and Garrick Harper – are suspected to be either Death Eaters or sympathizers, so we can't rely on them supporting any measure among the school governors to protect you."

"Something about your voice tells me that you think the situation is worse than even this," Harry said suspiciously. "Come on, spill it Tonks."

She sighed, and her hair slid to a rather dull grayish black. "That one, Castellan Zabini, is responsible for a lot of the magical transportation over the Channel, and he makes enormous amounts of Galleons doing it. Unfortunately, he's married to one Aphrodite Zabini, who is a known friend of Lucius Malfoy."

“So you think his wife will make him sympathize with the Ministry?” Harry asked with a sinking feeling.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Tonks replied grimly, “and if he doesn’t, I’m sure Aphrodite will just have him killed. After all, rumor has it she’s murdered six husbands before – I’m sure she wouldn’t have any problem doing it again.”

Harry shivered. “That’s... that’s a little creepy, if you don’t mind me saying.” His eyes brightened as they moved over to the ‘red’ area of the page. “Why is Dumbledore’s name on the page? He’s not a school governor!”

“Ah, glad you caught that,” Tonks said with a growing smile. “Ordinarily, the Headmaster doesn’t have a lot of influence with the school governors – of course, considering Dumbledore’s other positions, he typically has as much influence as he wants, but things are a bit different now, considering the way the Prophet’s painting him. The governors are typically supposed to serve as a check on the power of the Headmaster, even to remove him if necessary. However, such major decisions require a unanimous vote.”

“That doesn’t explain why his name is here, though.”

Tonks smiled. “Well, in the rare case where the school governors can’t come to a consensus – and on a highly charged issue like this, I doubt they will – and the vote is split six to six, the Headmaster is allowed a vote. It has rarely ever happened, but if we can get six of the governors solidly on our side, Dumbledore will be able to swing the decision.”

“Do you think, though, that the Minister will –”

“Allow it?” Tonks finished, chucking a bit. “Harry, he won’t have a choice. Fudge may be changing laws, but he can’t erase a four hundred year legacy with the drop of his bowler. Trust me, Harry, as long as we can get six of them on our side, we should be fine.”

“From the looks of this list, though, it only looks like we have three in the ‘red’,” Harry replied, concern filling his voice as he read the names. “Wait a minute... ‘Elphias Doge, I know that name...”

“Newly appointed a few years ago, taking Malfoy’s seat, and he’s also a member of the Order,” Tonks replied. “And Samson Prewett is a known sympathizer with the Order – hell, his sons died fighting the Death Eaters, and they went down like heroes. And Tiberius Ogden is an old friend of Dumbledore’s from the 1920’s, or so Sirius thinks. He’s also on the Wizengamot, and from his experiences, he’d likely support your actions.” Tonks shook her head wistfully. “After all, he actually believes Dumbledore, unlike the majority of that group.”

“That’s only three governors, though,” Harry said heavily. “What about the other four?”

“Let’s see here... Erasmus Moon is a rich wizard theorist, responsible for some of the new advancements in the Nimbus series of brooms. Apparently, he was the one behind the whole Firebolt model, and he’s raking in the Galleons because of it.” Tonks frowned. “In fact, I think he might have mentioned a desire to meet with you.”

“What?”

“It was in the Prophet last year, I think. He heard from Skeeter’s article that you flew a Firebolt against that Hungarian Horntail and he wanted you to advertise for him. You didn’t hear about that?”

“Not at all!” Harry exclaimed. “Do you think he’s still interested?”

Tonks pursed her lips. “It would all depend on whether you actually got off on these charges or not, but frankly, even attaching your name to a broom would be an immediate money-spinner. He could stand to make a lot of Galleons from this.”

“Can you contact him?” Harry asked, his eyes shining with exhilaration.

“Probably,” Tonks replied, making a tiny mark beside the man’s name. “Okay, so that’s one. Let me see...hmm, there’s Gertrude Marshbanks, younger sister of Griselda Marshbanks. You’ll become familiar with Griselda, she’s an O.W.L. examiner. Gertrude apparently holds the position of school governor along with a Ministry ambassadorship to Russia.”

Harry whistled. “So she’s probably out of town at the moment –”

“And the only way she’d be getting information about this case would be from the Prophet,” Tonks finished, looking disgruntled. “Damn it, we’ll need a way to get her informed about the situation!”

“A letter?”

“It would take Hedwig ages to get to Moscow, and we don’t have that kind of time,” Tonks replied tersely. “We’ll need to somehow bring her back early... that one might take some more digging.” She circled the name on the paper and glared at it, as if Gertrude Marshbanks had personally deeply offended her.

“What about this one... Barnabus Cuffe?” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “That name sounds familiar too...”

“I’m not surprised,” Tonks replied bitterly. “That’s the editor for the Daily Prophet.”

Harry’s face twisted into an ugly scowl. “So why, exactly, isn’t he deep in the ‘green’?”

“Primarily because Sirius still thinks he’s a possibility,” Tonks said, crossing her arms over her chest. “The man is reportedly amicable to bribery, and he’s a nasty little social climber too. Rumor has it that the only reason he’s a school governor is because he threatened one with nasty publicity until they resigned.”

“And Sirius thinks this Cuffe can be convinced?” Harry asked skeptically.

“No, but he thinks that Cuffe can be bribed,” Tonks replied with a smirk. “And here, we have help. Dumbledore sent a message to me saying that he’s willing to put some of his own lesser known investments on the table if we need to... convince anyone.”

“That’s awfully generous of him,” Harry replied tonelessly.

“You should thank him,” Tonks replied with a hard look at Harry. “That’s a lot of money Dumbledore’s willing to give to you.”

Harry didn’t reply as his eyes moved to the last name on the list. “Nathan Cassane... I’ve never heard that name before –”

“I’m not surprised,” Tonks replied seriously, tapping the man’s name with her finger. “Currently, he’s the new Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards – he replaced Dumbledore after he was demoted.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What do you know about him?”

“Unfortunately, not a lot,” Tonks admitted. “He’s filthy rich – the Cassanes have had money for centuries, but it’s been a long time since one’s been to Hogwarts, primarily because Nathan Cassane was an only child and he’s never married. Apparently, the man made even more money from his ‘archeological expeditions’ to magical sites across Eastern Europe and the Middle East.”

“So he’s an archeologist?”

“Well, that’s the polite term for what he’s doing, but Sirius calls him a ‘tomb raider’,” Tonks replied wryly. “I think there was some conflict between the Blacks and the Cassanes a couple decades back, and I don’t think Sirius is particularly fond of that family. However, besides Nathan, I don’t think there are any Cassanes left alive.”

“So who does he support?” Harry asked sharply. “Me, or the Ministry?”

“Honestly, Harry, I don’t think he even cares,” Tonks replied with a shrug. “He only took the job as Supreme Mugwump as a last favor for Fudge, and otherwise I don’t think he has set foot in the Ministry for decades. I think the key with him will be getting more information – at least enough so we can find out what he wants, and how to give it to him.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Harry said thoughtfully. “So we’ve got at least three people to convince – ideally four, so Dumbledore doesn’t have to break the tie and further infuriate the Ministry... It might be worth contacting Fleur, she might have some information on this Cassane character, particularly if she has seen any of his files...”

“But why would she have seen any of his files?” Tonks asked, cocking an eyebrow. “Harry, she doesn’t work at Gringotts anymore, and I just told you that Cassane hasn’t set foot in the Ministry for decades, so why would she see his files?”

Harry frowned. “But considering Cassane’s position as Supreme Mugwump, doesn’t he have to have his finances as a matter of public record, in case of corruption allegations?”

Tonks laughed openly at that, and Harry went red with embarrassment.

“What, it was an idea!”

“I know, Harry, I know. If anything, it’s not a bad one. It’s more like such a measure would never get through to the International Confederation. Not a chance – too many of them are likely running little operations on the side that nobody wants to see.”

“Okay, it was just a thought!” Harry retorted, pulling his bag out and dropping it onto the table. He began rooting around in it. “Fleur probably could still come in handy...”

“Harry, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in, I dunno, class?” Tonks asked, a smirk crossing her face. “It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“And?” Harry replied, pulling out a rather squashed sandwich and biting into it.

“Don’t you have class?”

“Just Defence Against the Dark Arts, but don’t worry, I’m not planning on going.”

“What?”

Harry gave Tonks an exasperated look. “Why would I go to a class where I’m going to learn nothing and be placed in a situation for Umbridge to have power over me? I’m sorry, it’s not worth my time –”

“She’s going to use this against you!” Tonks interrupted, her eyes wide. “Harry, think for a second about what you’re doing! She’ll be sure to tell Fudge that you’re skipping her class, not to mention the rest of H.A.I.T.!”

“Skipping class isn’t a crime,” Harry pointed out, “and I’ll probably be better prepared for my O.W.L. by working on my own than by wasting my time there.”

“She’ll take away house points, you know.”

Harry snorted. “And that matters how?”

“She’ll probably give you detention too.”

“She’s already tried that – I just haven’t shown up.” Harry shrugged. “And it’s not like McGonagall or Dumbledore are going to force me to go to her detentions. Are you going to force me to go, Tonks?”

Tonks sighed as she looked back to the list. "Sometimes, I hate my job."

Harry patted her on the shoulder. "I could suggest alternatives —"

"Oh, shut up. What we need now is some way that we can make our moves to influence the governors without being directly identified." She tapped her lips thoughtfully as she eyed the paper. "And you, Harry, are going to have to do some of this yourself — I've got my H.A.I.T. duties to handle, and for the most part, you've got freedom to do as you wish."

"At least until the interrogation," Harry muttered grimly. "The key here will be getting a disguise and leaving of the school without being identified —"

"And with H.A.I.T. patrolling the grounds, it'll be a lot harder than you think," Tonks replied seriously. "I can give you some of the patrol routes, but the odds are against you there, Harry."

"I've got other ways out of the school," Harry replied with a secret smile, thinking of the secret passageways that Fred and George had shown him. "I think the disguise becomes the real problem here, considering that I'm going to need one that'll both last and be effective." He sighed. "I almost wish I was a Metamorphmagus."

"Don't," Tonks muttered. "Trust me on this."

"What else am I supposed to do, then?" Harry asked, frustration leaking into his voice. "Snape's bound to have protections over his store cupboards, so Polyjuice Potion is out. And frankly, I'm not sure I want to try using that stone and Visual Expectations Charm again. It's too risky."

"Agreed there," Tonks said, frowning as she picked up one of the books she had brought over from Sirius'. "Although, I might have seen something that could help us here..."

“I thought you said those books wouldn’t be of any use if you weren’t a Metamorphmagus,” Harry said suspiciously as he looked over Tonks’ shoulder.

“We had a bit of a time problem there,” Tonks replied, elbowing Harry playfully in the gut, “and though we don’t have a lot of time now, we might just have enough to try something from in here. The real problem is that this book references a bunch of other books that I know Sirius doesn’t have.”

“They could be in the Hogwarts library,” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah, but Kemester’s practically made that place his second home,” Tonks muttered with disgust, violently flipping another page. “It’ll be tricky getting something out of there without him noticing, and anything I’m thinking about is bound to be in the Restricted Section.”

“I’ve got my Invisibility Cloak,” Harry said with a grin. “We can get past him. Hell, I’ve done it before, I can do it again. Any ideas on what we could try?”

“Maybe this,” Tonks murmured, flattening the page as she leaned closer. “According to this, back in the sixteenth century, a group of pureblood wizards tried to use Metamorphmagi blood to...” She frowned. “This can’t be right. That’s impossible.”

“What?” Harry asked curiously, leaning closer.

“ They tried to use Metamorphmagi blood to transfer their consciences into a non-functioning human body in order to animate and control it as if it were their own,” Tonks read. “I don’t know how they came up with that, but it just sounds disgusting.”

Harry frowned. “You’re meaning to tell me that those wizards tried to possess a dead body to control it? That’s just bizarre.”

“ Apparently,” Tonks continued, “notes confiscated from the experiments stated that preliminary trials were... were successful and

the triumphant wizards dubbed the new art 'simulamancy'." She snorted. "Should have called it necromancy, if anything –"

"Wait a minute, you're telling me those wizards succeeded?" Harry demanded, looking closer. "Whatever happened to them?"

Tonks elbowed Harry out of the way and looked closer at the book. "According to this, the notes were confiscated by the Ministry and after considerable examination by the Department of Mysteries, the conclusion was drawn that the 'extraordinary drawbacks and limitations' of the magic made 'simulamancy' little more than a curiosity. The wizards responsible for the research were reprimanded, with their files were confiscated, and shipped to..."

She stopped reading, hardly able to believe the words on the page. "No way, that's too coincidental."

Harry smiled. "They were shipped to the Hogwarts library, as the leading storehouse of esoteric magic in England," he finished, his eyes gleaming. "This is brilliant, Tonks! It's probably in the Restricted Section, but this 'simulamancy' magic could be the key!"

"Hold on a second, let me get the book titles referenced here," Tonks said quickly, yanking out her quill and scribbling the titles on a scrap piece of paper. "Looks like a fair amount of reading –"

Suddenly, bright silver light filled the room, and both of them shielded their eyes as a lynx bounded in. Tonks' eyes narrowed as she recognized Kingsley's Patronus – but what was it doing here?

"Tonks, the Order's having an emergency meeting, and you need to get to the Entrance Hall immediately. The Ministry's arrested Sturgis Podmore."

Harry frowned. "Why the hell –"

"Shh!" Tonks hissed, looking at the Patronus with confusion. "But why would they have arrested Sturgis, he's not guarding it any more –"

“It’s not that,” the Patronus replied, as if expecting Tonks’ answer – which, knowing Kingsley, it probably had been programmed to do so. “The Minster’s already interrogating Dumbledore, and a larger group’s on his way here. Tonks, Sturgis confessed to murder – murder on Dumbledore’s orders.”

* * *

“ You must understand, Cornelius, that making any sort of allegations here could prove disastrous –”

“Podmore claims that he was acting on your orders when he killed Laertes Rawling!” Fudge shouted, slamming the message down on the table. The owl that had just delivered the message squawked twice before flying straight out the window. The two grizzled Aurors standing behind Fudge tensed and kept their eyes firmly on Dumbledore, who was sitting calmly across from where the Minister for Magic had taken his seat. “And there’s a written confession!”

Dumbledore met Fudge’s eyes. “And?”

“Don’t feign ignorance here, Dumbledore, I don’t have the patience for it!” Fudge snarled. “I only agreed to this meeting because –”

“Because you wish to convict Harry Potter of a crime he could not have committed, or because your recent actions within the Wizengamot were unconstitutional?” Dumbledore asked innocently, a twinkle in his blue eyes. “

Fudge went red. “You are no longer a member of that court, Dumbledore, and you have no authority to countermand any decisions I might make regarding it!”

“Forgive me, then, Minister,” Dumbledore replied diplomatically. “A slight slip of the tongue, nothing more.”

Fudge slammed both of his pudgy hands on the table and looked straight into Dumbledore’s eyes. “I want you to give me one good

reason why I shouldn't have you arrested for conspiracy to commit murder, Dumbledore."

"Would you listen to it if I told you?" Dumbledore asked calmly, stifling a sigh. "Cornelius, surely you can see the pattern already emerging here. Dementors in Little Whinging, the break-ins at Gringotts and the Department of Mysteries, the Ollivanders' explosion, the reported increase in the activity of Sirius Black, and now this: the murder of an Unspeakable in the Ministry itself. The pattern echoes one years older – when Lord Voldemort was on the rise."

Fudge flinched at the sound of the name, but his expression was still hostile. "And all we have to support that conclusion is your word and that of Potter – and I'm currently disinclined to accept anything Potter says as fact and not a lie to save his own skin!"

"Have I ever lied to you, Cornelius?" Dumbledore asked quietly, a somber note creeping into his voice. "If I ever have made an attempt to deceive you, I apologize, but I do indeed believe Harry, and he has the scars to prove the nightmarish journey he took through that Portkey, where he witnessed Lord Voldemort's resurrection –"

"And so what do you have to prove, Dumbledore, that you weren't involved Podmore's murderous intentions?" Fudge said with a sneer. "Once again, all we are relying on is your word, and your word only, against a dearth of evidence otherwise!"

"Is there really a dearth of evidence, Cornelius?" Dumbledore asked, his tone a mixture of tiredness and curiosity, as if he had already heard what Fudge was about to say, but was curious if anything was to be presented. "Or have you become so blind to the truth that you take the dubious word of one man over any evidence presented to the contrary? Let's consider my 'motive' – why would I seek to have Podmore murder anybody, much less a high-ranking Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries? Furthermore, Rawling and I were on excellent terms – what evidence would indicate that I would have any desire to murder him?"

Fudge looked as if he was getting more and more flustered with each passing second. "Look, Dumbledore, Podmore already confessed –"

"And perhaps he did confess to Rawling's murder – a confession I sincerely hope was not made under duress or Veritaserum, for you know as well as anybody the legal implications there – but an attempt to connect me to the killing is an indicator is finger-pointing at best and outright fraudulent at worst."

"So do you have any ideas who may have compelled Podmore to kill?" Fudge snapped, trying to regain his composure. "Besides your obvious whims?"

"Several, many I know you will reject immediately because of their connections to the Death Eaters," Dumbledore replied calmly. "I'm inclined to believe that Rawling was killed because of his position within the Department of Mysteries – and because of his research into the metaphysical mechanics of prophecy and temporal flow."

"A good reason for you to have him killed," Fudge snarled, "considering the next leading expert in that field is you."

"Be that as it may, Cornelius," Dumbledore replied calmly, "let us consider one final point. Why didn't Podmore Apparate away once he was cornered? Furthermore, why did he allow himself to be caught to implicate me? Finally, why was it so easy to coerce a confession from him? These questions remain unanswered, Cornelius."

"Perhaps he was looking for a deal," Fudge growled. "A Galleon for a Knut."

"Cornelius, if I wanted to have somebody killed, the body would not be found, and nor would the killer," Dumbledore said, his voice abruptly cold. "The person would simply be there one day and gone the next – and nothing would remain to tie the incident back to me. And you know this better than anybody."

The Minister for Magic went deathly pale, and both of the Aurors tensed, their hands drifting to their wands. "Are you... are you threatening me, Dumbledore?"

"I am stating a fact, nothing more," Dumbledore replied, a hint of a grin crossing his face. "Cornelius, I did not have Sturgis Podmore assassinate Laertes Rawling, and I suggest you allow the Aurors and Hit Wizards to examine the case and suspect, if only to prove my innocence."

Fudge stood abruptly. "You're taking this far too lightly, Dumbledore, and you will be watched."

"Of course."

"And this business with Potter – the interrogation will be public and as soon as possible. Legal counsel will be provided by the Ministry –"

"Oh, I would not want to inconvenience the Ministry's pocketbook any further," Dumbledore replied airily, also rising to his feet and giving the Minister a respectful nod. "I can aid Mr. Potter in his finding of legal counsel. And, as it has been set down in the agreements between the Ministry and Hogwarts, the school governors will define the terms of the interrogation when it occurs."

"When it occurs," Fudge growled. "It will occur, Dumbledore, or Hogwarts will not be under your control for long. And if you keep blaming Potter's crimes on the nebulous of You-Know-Who..." He let his voice trail off, attempting to sound ominous. Dumbledore only smiled patiently.

"Of course, Cornelius."

Dumbledore waited in silence for an entire minute after Fudge left the room, and his voice was hard as granite the second he spoke.

"Do you have an explanation, Alastor?"

There was a shimmer, and the harsh, bitter visage of Alastor Moody came into view. The old Auror shoved his Invisibility Cloak into a pouch that Dumbledore knew was extended before meeting the Headmaster's gaze with his mismatched eyes.

"Fudge moved too fast," Moody growled, limping over to the seat Fudge had vacated a minute earlier and slumping into it. "We couldn't get Sturgis out in time."

"He confessed very quickly –"

"Of course he did, he was paid off!" Moody growled, his electric-blue eyes spinning in its socket. "He was always a lazy, scummy bit of filth, just like that walking trash heap Fletcher, and now he's going to rot in Azkaban." He snorted. "Bloody serves him right, for being so careless. He didn't even ask to borrow my spare Invisibility Cloak!"

"Sturgis is a good man," Dumbledore replied quietly.

"He should never have been trusted with this job, Albus, and you know it," Moody spat. "And the only reason you let him do it is because –"

"We don't have the manpower, Alastor, you know that," Dumbledore finished. "At least we had the Aurors on our side last time."

"You've got the Aurors that matter," Moody said grimly, "and that's what's important."

"Lord Voldemort's moving more quickly now, and with the financial resources at his disposal, he can outspend us as well. There will only be so long that we can rely on personal investments and the Hogwarts reserves. Has there been any luck with Cassane?"

"He's claims that he doesn't want to get involved," Moody replied darkly, "and with his fortune, who can blame him? It'll only be a matter of time before Voldemort takes a shot at him, though – or makes him an offer he can't refuse."

“We need to cut off Voldemort’s funding,” Dumbledore said quietly, as he rose to his feet. “With Malfoy’s accounts on the table, coupled with those from the other affluent Death Eaters, he can bribe anyone he wishes and purchase foreign magic – some that even I have not likely seen. It is essential this flow of gold stops.”

Moody groaned with frustration. “Goblin security is getting better than ever, Albus, it’s not going to be easy to meddle with that kind of money without alarms being raised. And before you even ask, I’m running out of favours I can call in, particularly with auditors.”

“And given my precarious position, I cannot afford to leave the school at this time,” Dumbledore finished with a heavy sigh. He felt wearier than ever. “Do you have any news from Charlie? Do we have any international wizards coming?”

Moody shook his head. “The Quidditch World Cup incident didn’t do a lot for England’s reputation – and most wizards can’t be bothered to leave and deal with a threat that hasn’t even been publicized. And with the Prophet running wild –”

Dumbledore sighed heavily. “We have no choice then. We must curb the bad publicity with something new, and bribing the Prophet will not work forever.”

“Cuffe’s a greedy bastard, and the fact he’s only giving us editorial space for our articles –”

“Is to be expected, considering the Ministry and the public mood,” Dumbledore said, a small note of disappointment creeping into his voice. “If we want to change the public mood, we’ll need to give Harry open press – preferably before the school governors have their vote. And the public is only as stalwart as yesterday’s headline.”

Moody’s expression was disgusted, as if he has stepped in something foul. “You want me to call Skeeter, then?”

“The Prophet wouldn’t want to refuse to publish something from her,” Dumbledore reasoned, “and with a sizable enough payment, we’ll make them an offer they can’t refuse.”

“And Harry?” There was skepticism in Moody’s voice. “He’s trusts you enough to tell that kind of truth to the public?”

“We have an understanding,” Dumbledore replied, a note of wistfulness creeping into his voice. “Hopefully that will be enough. And I’ll make sure to speak with Sturgis as soon as I get a chance.”

“That assumes Fudge’ll let you anywhere close to the prison,” Moody growled.

“I won’t need to deal with Azkaban yet,” Dumbledore replied grimly.

“What? Why not?”

“Because, by the end of the year, Lord Voldemort will make his move.”

* * *

“You should have seen Umbridge today,” Ron grumbled, running a hand through his hair as he sat down next to Harry. “She was livid that you didn’t show up.”

“So?” Harry asked with disinterest, as he shoved a generous helping of pork onto his plate and added potatoes and gravy.

“She said that ‘the Minister will hear about his delinquency’.” Ron chuckled as he loaded his own plate. “Honestly, I would ditch the class myself if I didn’t know that my mum would kill me if she heard.”

“What about the tiny little fact that you’re a prefect?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow as he cut up his meat. “Ron, don’t blow that chance just to support me. You could be Head Boy in two years.”

Ron snorted. "I can only wish. Oh, and did you hear the news about Malfoy?"

"Besides the fact that he's a tosser?"

"Well, apparently something happened over lunch earlier that pissed him off so much he skived off classes too! Nobody's seen the prat all day!"

"And since when is that a bad thing?" Harry said with a shrug. "Not even that bad for him, he would have only missed one or two classes."

"Well, the news is that Crabbe and Goyle didn't go with him, but Zabini and Nott apparently did," Ron added with a frown as he shoveled food into his mouth. "You see, that's strange. Malfoy doesn't typically hang around with either of them."

"He's with Zabini a bit, and nobody hangs around with Nott," Harry agreed. "I swear, he spends more time in the library than most Ravenclaws."

Ron looked around carefully before lowering his voice. "Do you think... you know, they're doing something?"

"Can't imagine what," Harry replied with disgust. "None of them are competent enough to pull off one of his plans —"

"They're up to something," Ron muttered. Harry shrugged and continued eating.

"Harry, is there something up? You look tired, mate."

"Didn't sleep well last night," Harry replied quietly. "Now drop it, nobody needs to know."

"You didn't get back until late. What happened —"

“Not here, not now, Ron,” Harry growled. “If I get a chance, I’ll tell you later.” He checked his watch. “And she should be back by now, so I’ve got to run. Later, Ron.”

He quickly got up and left the table, leaving Ron with the distinct feeling that Harry wasn’t telling him something.

* * *

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Is Dumbledore in trouble? What happened? Did he get arrested or —”

“He met with Fudge earlier, and he came back to Hogwarts, so I’m assuming he didn’t get arrested,” Tonks muttered as moved towards the side entrance of the library. “According to Kingsley, he’s being watched.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he followed closely behind Tonks. “And?”

“And what?”

“Did he do it? Have Sturgis kill someone?”

“Kingsley wouldn’t say, Harry!” Tonks hissed. “I can’t see Dumbledore doing it, but I can’t exactly see myself sneaking around with you trying to break into the library!”

“Sneaking around with me? Tonks, we only just met —”

“Hey, I’ve got the monopoly on making sexual innuendos here, not you,” Tonks replied with an exasperated smirk. “You have your Invisibility Cloak?”

‘I wouldn’t be here without it.’

“Good. Knowing Kemester, he’s probably lurking somewhere in the Restricted Section, and we’ll have to be careful if we want to find the books we need.”

“And how many do we need?”

“Five.”

Harry whistled softly as Tonks carefully slid the door open and began moving inside. “This ‘simulamancy’ thing must be more complicated than I thought.”

“What, you didn’t think it would just require the blood of a Metamorphmagus to possess corpses now, did you?” Tonks asked with a snort. “Harry, it took a team of five very intelligent wizards years to make this work, and they probably had years of magical theory training behind them. And we’ve got... well, you.”

“And you,” Harry added with a wink. “You’re sort of the key ingredient, here.”

“Bite me.”

“Where?”

Tonks groaned. “You’ve been spending way too much time around me and Sirius.”

“So what books do we need?”

The Metamorphmagus pulled out the tiny scrap of paper where she had scrawled her list. “Let’s see... The Book of Inversion and Duplex... well, that should be in the magical theory section, I think I remember McGonagall mentioning it before... Consciousness Conjunctions will definitely be in the Restricted Section. So will Blood and Astral Projection: A Thesis –”

“That sounds more like an essay than a book.”

“Harry, it probably is an essay.”

Harry whistled again. “That’d be one hell of a long essay.”

“Oh, you’re just going to love your N.E.W.T.s,” Tonks muttered, metamorphosing into a short blonde with extremely close-cropped hair and wide eyes. “And the last two... well, The Study of Age and Magic shouldn’t be hard to find, that’s a fairly common book, but I’ve never even heard of Metamagical Extrabiology: An Examination. Where do you think that is?”

Harry raised his hands helplessly. “Good thing the Restricted Section is sorted alphabetically, isn’t it?”

“Harry, I’m starting to think we aren’t qualified to work with this sort of magic. These titles are starting to scare me a little.”

“We can’t exactly back out now, Tonks,” Harry muttered, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out. “I’m sure that the two of us will be able to puzzle it out. After all, this ‘simulamancy’ thing sounds a lot like some form of Transfiguration, and didn’t you get top marks in that class?”

“Yes, but –”

“Then I’m sure we’ll be okay,” Harry reassured her. “Now let’s get this Cloak on before Pince sees us. And remember that I’m leading here, so keep close, quiet, and your hands to yourself. Remember – you were the one who nearly failed Stealth and Tracking, not me.”

Tonks rolled her eyes, but she only grinned as she joined Harry under the Cloak.

“Where first?” he whispered.

“Let’s go to the Restricted Section. With any luck, Kemester will have actually gone to dinner and won’t be lurking in there.”

But it turned out that Kemester was nowhere to be found within the deserted narrow aisles, and after a few minutes of careful searching, they had found the rune-covered grey book that Tonks said was Consciousness Conjunctions.

“Are you sure this is it?” Harry asked skeptically as he slid it into his bag. “I mean, I don’t see a title.”

“It’s used as a textbook in Auror training... well, more for extra reading than anything, but I’ve seen it before. Now let’s find that blood magic book.”

But when they found it – clearly labeled and shoved deep into the shelf, Tonks did not move to pull it out. Instead, she pulled out a set of what appeared to be barbeque tongs.

“What are those for?”

“The book,” Tonks replied briskly, slowly pushing the other books away from her target with a few quick taps of her tongs.

“I don’t think we need tongs for that kind of book –” Harry began, but then Tonks withdrew the metal-bound book, and Harry saw what appeared to be jagged blades roughly jammed between the covers, rasping slightly together as Tonks carefully pulled open her own bag.

“Ever seen the Monster Book of Monsters, Harry?”

He nodded. “It was our textbook for Care for Magical Creatures. Hagrid assigned it.”

“Can’t be surprised there,” Tonks muttered, quickly dropping the book into her bag and sealing it tight. “Well, picture that book, just a hundred times worse. All blood magic books are voracious, but this one looks just plain nasty. Probably could take somebody’s head off.”

Harry shivered as he looked down the aisle. “We should probably hurry. Do you think we should look for that last book in here?”

“Metamagic Extrabiology: An Examination? Well, I’ve never seen the thing, but it couldn’t hurt. You’re right, though, we should hurry.”

It took another fifteen minutes before Harry and Tonks finally found the book. Like they had expected, it had been buried deep in the Restricted Section. The book was extremely thick, and one glance at the pages made Harry wince – the text was so tiny and so dense that he doubted any usage of it would be disastrous.

Tonks hefted it with a disappointed snort. “Why should I be surprised this thing is about two inches thick?” she grumbled, shoving it into her back.

“You’re reading that one,” Harry whispered. “You’re the one with the experience, after all.”

“The things I do to make you happy –”

“Shh! Keep it down! Pince is just around the corner over there!”

They both held their breaths as Madam Pince walked out from between two of the aisles, a suspicious look upon her face. She peered down the stacks of books, her eyes narrowing as she traced every inch of the hall with her beady gaze. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Harry, she turned and stormed away.

“That was too close,” Tonks muttered.

“Agreed. Let’s go get those other books.”

It wasn’t hard to find *A Study of Age and Magic*, but Tonks insisted they pick up the oldest copy they could find – particularly considering how old her own *Metamorphmagi* book was.

“It’ll be easier to reference specific pages,” Tonks said when Harry has quietly asked.

“It looks like Dumbledore’s even mentioned in the fourth edition of the book,” Harry mused. “That’s impressive.”

“Not really,” Tonks replied with a shrug. “If I remember correctly, a lot of magical theorists ask Dumbledore to help write or edit their work. It’s common sense, really.”

“Tonks, keep quiet,” Harry said quickly, suddenly tensing.

“What’s the problem?”

“I think I might hear Umbridge...”

Tonks swore under her breath. “She’s probably talking to Kemester... let’s go take a look.”

“We’ve got to be completely silent, then,” Harry whispered. “The last thing we want is to get caught eavesdropping – you could lose your job.”

“Then we’ll be very, very quiet now, won’t we?” Tonks whispered back with a wink. Pocketing the old book, they moved towards a tiny table shoved in a nearby corner of the library. Completely windowless, Harry could see the squat figure of Professor Umbridge silhouetted against the candlelight – speaking angrily to a tall, menacing figure.

Kemester, Harry thought, his hand sliding towards his wand.

“What exactly do mean? You don’t want to take the position as the Hit Wizard interrogator?” Umbridge said with a raise of her delicate eyebrows.. “I thought, considering all the evidence, that this would be what you wanted –”

“I’m not going to deny that I would have no qualms interrogating Potter,” Kemester replied back evenly, “and that he and I have a score to settle. And that’s precisely why you don’t want me on that team.”

“Forgive me, Dmitri, but I seem a teensy bit confused by this,” Umbridge began after a few seconds of silence. “Don’t you want Potter to suffer the just punishment for his actions?”

“Yes.”

“And wouldn’t you agree that you are one of the most skilled interrogators within the Hit Wizards?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Dear Dmitri, you can’t forget that that boy was responsible for your brother’s death,” Umbridge said, a consolatory tone dripping from her every word. “Surely you haven’t forgotten him?”

Harry clenched his fist at Umbridge’s words, but Kemester spoke before Harry could move any closer.

“Tell me, Dolores, where is Potter going to go? With Black lurking around, he doesn’t dare leave Hogwarts, and Dumbledore can only protect him for so long.”

“The old fool’s days are numbered.”

Kemester paused at the vehemence in Umbridge’s words, but when he spoke again, his voice was measured and cold. “I’m not going to lie when I say that I made mistakes when I went after Potter last time. I was angry, wasn’t thinking clearly, and I damaged my department’s reputation because of it. Bones and Scrimgeour personally made me swear that I was not to interfere in any future investigation regarding Potter –”

“An oath you’ve already broken,” Umbridge said softly, “with my aid.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to refuse that kind of opportunity to attempt to arrest Potter when he was vulnerable, but the fact remains now is that he’s got nowhere to run. So why should I bother to interfere in his affairs now? If anything, the delay in justice will force him to act more rashly than anything, and we’ll have more crimes to indict him for when he faces the Wizengamot.”

“That seems extraordinarily rational, coming from you, Dmitri.”

Kemester’s eyes hardened. “I’m more concerned about Sirius Black than Potter right now – and the possibility of a major leak within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“I’ve already assigned Sanders to the case –”

“And he is, forgive my language, a lazy, negligent bastard who has neither the respect nor the talent to be leading this investigation,” Kemester growled. “I’d rather Merlin-forsaken Shacklebolt be back leading this investigation than him, Dolores.”

“Shacklebolt may not be spending too much more time in the Auror Department, though, Dmitri,” Umbridge replied smoothly, pulling a paper out of her pink cardigan. “I recently received a very interesting letter from Rufus Scrimgeour regarding him.”

Both Harry and Tonks tensed. This was not good.

“And?”

“Shacklebolt is rapidly growing, ah, too big for his shoes,” Umbridge said sleekly. “Tsk, tsks, he’ll be getting himself into very big trouble soon.”

“He’s extremely competent, and even you chose to place him on that interrogation team,” Kemester replied suspiciously. “Why give him a position of power if you want... to...”

His voice trailed off, and his eyes hardened for a second. “I see.”

“His loyalties to Dumbledore will be exposed, and he will suffer the consequences of such loyalty,” Umbridge said softly, a hungry gleam filing her pouchy eyes. “The old puppet-master will be brought down before the end of this year – you can be sure of that.”

“You think he’s behind Potter as well?” Kemester asked slowly.

“What better way to destabilize the Ministry?” Umbridge replied quickly, leaning closer. Kemester slid back an inch, and Harry barely could stifle a laugh in time – it seemed even Kemester was repulsed by the squat woman.

“I think you’re giving Dumbledore too much credit,” Kemester replied, turning back to his papers, “and Potter not enough.”

“Potter’s fifteen. He can be manipulated. Dumbledore likely has a role in that.”

“Not if he chooses to skip all of your classes,” Kemester said sardonically.

It was Umbridge’s turn for her eyes to harden. “And he will pay for his insubordination, rest assured, Dmitri. I have a plan.”

“It had better be a good one, because planning doesn’t tend to work too well when it comes to Harry Potter,” Kemester replied. “Now, if you’d excuse me, I need to get back to work.”

“What on earth are you reading anyways?”

“Wizards financial law,” Kemester replied curtly. “It helps to sooth my conscience. Good night, Dolores.”

“Will you take the position on the interrogation team?”

“I’ll consider it, nothing more right now,” Kemester said shortly. “Good night, Dolores.”

Umbridge stared at the Hit Wizard for a few more seconds before turning and stalking away, leaving Kemester absorbed in his book and Harry and Tonks standing in silence a few aisles away.

“What,” Harry finally began, “was all that about?”

“I’m not sure,” Tonks whispered, “but we need to get that last book so we can get to work. Something tells me you’re going to be short on free time very soon.”

* * *

His candles had burned low, but Kemester kept reading, his eyes close to the old book as he pored through the tedious records – histories of finance stretching back to the founding of Gringotts.

All I need is ample precedent to accomplish what I want, he thought to himself, and then Potter will discover that my brother’s life was indeed worth more than that paltry sum he paid...

He knew that he would probably take the position on the interrogation team, if only to stave off Umbridge’s persistent nagging. He wouldn’t mind looking into Potter’s eyes when he told him he would have to face a trial that would send him to Azkaban. If only for that, it would be worth it.

He turned away from the book to look at the tiny scrawled note that he had received early in the morning. He would have ignored it, in nearly every other circumstance, but he had a hunch that the writer might actually live up to his – or her – promises. I don’t know what this person’s offering, but it better be worth my wait...

Suddenly, he froze in his seat. Something had changed in the corner of the library where he had been working... the air was cold and clammy, as if a sudden frost has frozen dew on his skin...

He slowly rose to his feet and drew his wand, his keen eyes scanning the darkness. He knew something was up – probably some pestilential student playing a trick on him, or –

“You know, you’re awfully antisocial for such an ugly face.”

Against his better instincts, Kemester nearly jumped as the ghost slid through the wall, his eyes gleaming with wicked malice.

“Go to hell, Peeves, and leave me alone. I’m working.”

“I honestly think they tried sending me to Hell,” Peeves mused, sliding along the wall in midair towards the seat opposite Kemester. “Hmm... must have been filled with all those wasted heroes...”

“Go pester somebody else, Peeves. That’s all you do, anyways.”

Peeves cocked his head to the side, and in a second, Kemester could see that something was different about the poltergeist. A thinner face, a wider mouth, sunken eyes looking devilishly intelligent and impossibly mad...

“I’m actually here to deliver... somewhat of a warning, I think,” Peeves said slowly, settling into the chair and folding his fingers. “Care to hear?”

“No.”

“You really should. You really should.” Peeves’ voice dropped an octave as he slid through the table towards Kemester. There was no doubt in the Hit Wizard’s mind now, something had changed about the poltergeist. Something downright evil...

“I’m working, Peeves,” Kemester growled through gritted teeth.

“Working to bring down little Potter, I would guess,” Peeves said with a grin. “I know, I overheard your, ah, discussion with the urbane toad. And I wasn’t the only one.”

Kemester’s eyes widened. Eavesdroppers! Damn it, this is the last thing I need now!

“You know something, Dmitri... may I call you Dmitri?” Peeves asked, his eyes gleaming in the dim candlelight.

“No.”

“You see, Dmitri, you don’t realize just how similar you and Potter really are,” Peeves began, floating closer to Kemester. “Little foils, you both are... both becoming consumed... and both players in the madness that is coming...”

“What are you talking about?”

“You see, Dmitri, you used to be that alpha dog, the one with the biggest teeth. But the thing about dogs like you is that you thrive when the explosions and fire break loose and flow in the alleys like blood in the gutters,” Peeves said, his smile widening, revealing yellowed teeth. “You’re playing a very different game now, Dmitri... this hell, you can’t tame, you can’t control, ‘cause it’s all in here!” At that second, the poltergeist shot up close, tapping Kemester lightly on the temple. He stumbled back at the frigid feeling searing through his mind, and Peeves cackled with glee.

“You see, you see! You’ll see soon enough, Dmitri, because it’s already starting, this game of souls, of little lives and lies! After all, you didn’t start the fire... it’s been always burning, since the world’s been turning...”

“What the hell happened to you?” Kemester snarled, rising to his full height and snapping his wand up to face the mad poltergeist.

“Me?” Peeves seemed always shocked at the question. “I just... do things. I’m not a schemer – and you’re not either. Dumbledore... well, there’s a schemer. He’s got plans, Umbridge and Fudge have plans, even little Harry has plans... but you, Dmitri... your plans don’t seem to work, ‘cause you don’t need them. They’re little chains, holding you back...” Peeves’ voice dropped an octave as he moved closer. “And you know it, too.”

Kemester’s eyes burned as he raised his wand even higher, to point right between Peeves’ eyes. The poltergeist looked at the wand, sighed once, and shook his head.

“You can’t hurt me, Dmitri, no matter how hard you try. They’ve been trying to erase me from this castle for centuries... but they

never could. I admire your balls, though – hope you hold onto them long enough to take out the rest of the trash –”

“You’re not making any sense,” Kemester snarled.

“When did I say I was going to make sense?” Peeves replied with an impossibly wide smile. “I’ll tell you one thing, though: you might not be a schemer, but you’re not a traitor either. Something to be proud of. You’re loyal... to something. Find what that is, and make sure you, ah, dispose of that trash when you’re finished. Find a little something to believe in?”

“And what do you believe in, huh?” Kemester snapped. “What do you believe in?”

Peeves’ eyes blazed even brighter as the candle flickered. “I believe... that half this school is going to go crazy very soon. Everyone will start losing their minds – even the sane ones. And I believe whatever won’t kill the rest will just make them... a little... different...”

And with a single wild cackle, Peeves flew straight through Kemester, extinguishing the candle and driving the library corner into darkness.

Swearing under his breath, Kemester lit his wand and looked around frantically. But all around him was silence. The poltergeist was gone – or at least he thought he was. He hoped he was.

It wasn’t sudden, but he heard footsteps. Despite his pounding heart, he sat down in the chair, laying his wand down next to the book. It would only be a few moments now...

The figure came out of the shadows, cloaked, and a hood thrown up, hiding her face. Kemester drummed his fingers on the desk as he tried to calm his heartbeat.

“I’ve been waiting for a long time, and quit with the cloak-and-dagger theatrics. You’re not impressing anyone. I’m a Hit Wizard, not a moron.”

“I’m here for all the wrong reasons,” the figure whispered, “but you need to know if something can be salvaged from this mess.”

“And I’m sure your reasoning is as noble as your intentions,” Kemester sneered. “Sit down – we have to talk, so you can tell me how you can get me Harry Potter.”

Author's Note: yeah, my muse is a bit of a bitch sometimes, so instead of updating some fics, I update this one - a lot. But in any case, here is the next chapter of Renegade Cause, and as always, read, review, and enjoy!

The message came just before dawn, but Walden Macnair was alert and listening within seconds.

“The Dark Lord has a new task for you, Macnair,” Nicholas Avery’s face said from within the shimmering grey cloud that was hovering above the fire. Macnair knew it was some form of Floo enhancement, but even he was a bit surprised that the mountain cave the massive Death Eater had been granted could be reached.

“I’m listening.”

“I’m sorry that we could not speak face-to-face –”

“Get to the point, Avery,” Macnair growled. “I can recognize the Dark Lord’s magic as well as anyone. You’re just lucky that the giants aren’t seeing it right now, I’m meeting with them first thing this morning.”

“That meeting will have to be...postponed,” Avery replied stiffly. “You are to head to Warsaw immediately and complete your task – the giants will have to wait.”

Macnair could hardly believe his ears. “Are you insane, Avery? They plan to raid the caves today, and I promised I would use my magic to guide them to the Order’s little sanctum –”

“There’s no time for that,” Avery replied curtly. “You are one of the most qualified Death Eaters in that region, and the only one with the skills to neutralize our target in the way the Dark Lord requires...”

A twisted smile spread across Macnair’s face. “He wants him in pieces?”

“As soon as possible,” Avery replied tersely, “and it is a ‘her’ you are to remove. She is taking a series of Portkeys back to London from Moscow, and she has an extended layover in Warsaw – one ‘lengthened’ by a ‘gift’ to the Polish Department of Magical Transportation. They’ll be inclined to look the other way, but expect Order interference – rumor has it that Dumbledore has an agent in Romania he may activate.”

“And how long am I to extend this, ah, layover?”

“Make sure she makes her next Portkey to Berlin, and make it look like a transportation accident,” Avery ordered briskly. “Do whatever you’d like to Dumbledore’s man – he’s all yours if he interferes. But remember that you can’t abandon your mission to the giants for long – the Dark Lord still requires them for his plans. Do you understand?”

“I need a name, Avery,” Macnair said, his eyes gleaming in the smoky grey light, all thoughts of the giants nearly forgotten.

“An ambassador to Russia from England, and a Hogwarts school governor. Her name is Gertrude Marchbanks.”

Macnair nodded and picked up his axe, carefully running his calloused finger down the edge of the blade, drawing a thin line of blood across the meticulously polished steel.

“Inform the Dark Lord that it will be done.”

* * *

“Thank Merlin it’s the weekend,” Harry groaned as he let himself into the abandoned classroom where he and Tonks had chosen to work that day. “I didn’t expect the O.W.L. workload to be this bad.”

“N.E.W.T.s are worse, depend on it,” Tonks muttered, leaning over the massive book spread across the table. The table was already covered with books, with pages of writing and calculations spread all over the place and sliding off the table. “A lot worse.”

“It looks like you’re making progress,” Harry replied tentatively, pulling Consciousness Conjunctions out of his bag and placing it on the chair. “I mean, all those calculations have got to mean we’re getting close –”

“Harry, my hair would be a much prettier colour if we were close,” Tonks interrupted with an irritated glance up from the book.

“What, the sodden, puke colour doesn’t work for you?”

“We’re nowhere near close to ready to try simulamancy,” Tonks replied with a frustrated groan as she pulled out another fresh piece of paper and scribbled something. “And cross-referencing from these books is a bloody nightmare. Merlin forbid any of these wizards of old giving any damned instructions on the proper way to proceed with this kind of magic...”

Harry winced. “That bad?”

“Even if we can find a usable corpse – one that’s only a few days gone – the number of diagnostic spells required to be cast is staggering,” Tonks snapped, tossing a crumpled piece of paper at Harry. “That’s about half of them – and all of them are high level charms that even Flitwick would have problems with on his bad days!”

Harry’s eyes widened as he unfolded the page. “There’s about fifty spells here! And I’ve never heard of most of them...”

“And that doesn’t even count the potions we need to prepare the body, enhance the connection, and make sure your consciousness doesn’t fizzle halfway in between the ritual, ‘cause neither of us want that.” Tonks shuddered. “From the warnings in the notes, such a ‘fizzling’ would likely be explosive – very explosive.”

“What kind of potions do we need?” Harry asked nervously. “Can we, I dunno, buy them or something? Through an owl order?”

“And how exactly do you think we’ll be able to get them into the school?” Tonks replied with another frustrated groan as she scribbled another line down on the paper. “Umbridge is petitioning to have all mail searched going in and out of Hogwarts, and odds are she’ll get it—”

“What?” Harry could hardly believe his ears. “She can’t do that! How on earth did she justify it?”

Tonks snorted. “Harry, it’s gotten to the point where Umbridge doesn’t need to justify what she’s doing. She can just go to Fudge and ask politely. Eventually, it’s going to click for her that she’s got virtually no accountability and when that happens... well, you’re certainly screwed, let me tell you that. Nah, basically the justification she gave to Fudge was that she suspected that ‘anti-government elements within the students may be communicating with dangerous outside elements.’ A load of bullshit, but Fudge is getting more paranoid than you are, so he bought it.” Setting down her quill, Tonks took a heavy swallow from her goblet, which was precariously placed on the edge of her chair. “And you know what the bad part of all this is?”

“Other than the fact that Umbridge is going to be reading my mail?” Harry asked furiously.

“More like the fact that she’s going to be using H.A.I.T. to do it,” Tonks said heavily. “As if we don’t have enough to do! Hell, she’s finding plenty of work for Larshall, and he’s not even assigned to H.A.I.T.!”

“Well, that’s not terrible,” Harry said reasonably. “Hell, if you’re doing the reading, it shouldn’t be difficult to sneak some of the potions through!”

“No guarantee that it’ll be me doing the investigating, though,” Tonks replied, rubbing her eyes as she slumped back in her chair and took another drink. “It’s too risky, Harry.”

“We’ll just have to sneak them up the secret passages, then,” Harry replied doggedly. “I mean, there’s at least a few that Umbridge

doesn't know about. Hell, there's a few that only Fred, George, and I know about! If we can get the potions into Hogsmeade, then it shouldn't be difficult sneaking them into the school."

"Speaking of Hogsmeade, Dumbledore asked me to give you this," Tonks said suddenly, pulling a small note out of her robes and tossing it to Harry, who carefully unfolded it and began to read it carefully.

Suddenly, he stopped, and clenched his fist over the note. "Tonks, what have you been telling him?"

"I've been telling him nothing," Tonks replied defensively as she raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Honestly, you think I'd be telling Dumbledore this sort of thing?"

"It's like he knows exactly what I'm doing with the school governors!" Harry growled. "Down to the ones that we need!"

"Harry, you've got to remember that a victory for him is a victory for us too," Tonks reasoned tiredly. "And you should almost be thanking him, really. Setting up that meeting with Moon is a godsend, because I wasn't even sure if I would be able to contact him. And the fact that he was able to get Marchbanks travelling back this early is phenomenal. Cassane will be the real one to convince, and believe me, you'll need his support if you want to get the counter-measure through."

"What counter-measure?" Harry asked suspiciously. "Tonks, I haven't heard about this..."

"It's okay, it's okay, it was Dumbledore's idea," Tonks hastily reassured him. "Basically, this decision to have the H.A.I.T. members interrogate you on Hogwarts property was written up in a measure, to be debated and argued by the school governors. Everything was formalized, primarily because it sets precedent – and because Dumbledore knew it would slow things down."

"Go on," Harry said, although the skepticism was still in his voice.

“Well, Dumbledore proposed to Doge that he should present a counter-measure to yours with certain conditions to limit the interrogation. Don’t forget, we aren’t blocking the interrogation, but we’re trying to make it less public – and more under the control of responsible parties.”

“Like Dumbledore.”

“Right. Well, a formalized counter-measure would have much more strength than just an informal debate, and more governors would be inclined to agree with it, thus the counter-measure. Follow me so far?”

“I think so,” Harry muttered as he scanned the paper. He looked up a few seconds later, panic spreading across his face. “Of course, you didn’t tell me that the meeting was in a few hours!”

“We’ve got time, don’t worry,” Tonks replied with a sigh. “Dumbledore gave you a pretty big window there, primarily because he used the excuse of you ‘looking for legal counsel’ as one to get you out of the school.”

“And Umbridge agreed to that?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Not easily, but she consented as long as a member of H.A.I.T. comes with you.” Tonks finally smiled. “Guess who that is – and the first two guesses don’t count.”

“You?”

“Yep. The good thing is that Umbridge doesn’t suspect any connection between us yet, so we still have some time.”

“Not enough,” Harry muttered, looking at some of the papers strewn around the table. “Not nearly enough, considering the date when the school governors are meeting.”

“We’ve got two weeks, Harry – and that’s a long time, considering the governors and their positions,” Tonks replied bracingly, scribbling down another line on the paper before sliding it aside and returning to the book.

“Enough to get the simulamancy working?” Harry asked, swallowing hard.

“If I go without sleep, then we might have time,” Tonks grumbled, “and if you manage to stay caught up on your reading and don’t end up in detention or something. This experiment’s already going to be dangerous enough, and you’re going to need to be sharp on your end.” She yawned heavily and slumped back in her chair again. “It’s not like I could sleep much even if I want to, though.”

“Not sleeping well?”

“Well, I’m not the only one,” Tonks said, peering closely at Harry’s face. “You look terrible.”

“Haven’t slept,” Harry muttered. “And when I have, I’ve been having dreams that don’t make the slightest bit of sense. Don’t think I’m the only one, though – Malfoy looks worse than Death, and he’s getting worse every day.”

“You ran into him on the way here, didn’t you?”

“Tried to give me a detention for being up early in the morning. I called him a tosser, told him I don’t bother going to Umbridge’s classes, much less her detentions, so why the hell would I go to any detention Malfoy assigned?”

Tonks gave a very unladylike grunt as she turned back to her pages. “It’s going to be tight though, Harry. We won’t have a lot of time – and the tiny little fact that we’re still missing our key ingredient makes things even worse. Harry, we’re going to need a corpse, and we’re going to need it fast.”

“Don’t you think I don’t know that?” Harry snapped, rubbing his head as he sat next to Tonks. “But I honestly don’t know how we can get one. I mean, it’s not like we can just get one from the Ministry –”

“Yeah, have fun going through that paperwork,” Tonks said with a snort. “Hell, I’ve seen it, when the Unspeakables request deceased victims or volunteers for the Department of Mysteries. Ugly stuff.”

“But, of course, we can always get around the paperwork,” Harry said, giving Tonks a penetrating gaze. “You’ve done it before.”

Tonks steadily met his gaze. “If you’re referring to the motorbike, I didn’t get it out of evidence storage, if that’s what you mean.”

“So where did you get it?”

“Knockturn Alley,” Tonks replied with a shrug. “The Aurors gave it back to Hagrid after they had finished examining it, and he sold it to a black-market dealer down there. There hadn’t been any buyers for it, but I managed to take it off his hands.” She winced. “And believe me, it wasn’t cheap.”

“You didn’t buy it as yourself, did you?” Harry asked, aghast. “They could track you through the dealer!”

“Don’t worry, I Obliviated the dealer after I took the bike, and given how Knockturn Alley works, I doubt the Ministry will ever find him.” She sighed contentedly. “It is fun sending Sanders on a wild goose chase, though, trying to find that bike. He’ll never be able to find it.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it’s sitting back at Grimmauld Place with Sirius,” Tonks finished with another swig from her goblet. “The dealer put a Reversible Shrinking Charm on it, for easy storage – only practical, considering how those people operate – so I just stuck it in my pocket, went up to Dumbledore’s office, and tossed it through his fireplace with a quick confirmation to Sirius.” She smiled. “Damn, I’m good. Not

gonna be able to do it again, what with Umbridge watching the Floo Network –”

“What?”

Tonks sighed. “You’re not supposed to know about that, but Umbridge has friends in the Department of Magical Transportation – a lot of them. She’s got Katherine Edgecombe watching the fireplaces here – everyone’s except her own, of course.”

“I’ve heard that name before,” Harry murmured, thinking hard. “Where have I heard it –”

“Her daughter’s a year above you,” Tonks replied, rubbing her eyes again. “Ravenclaw.”

“With Cho Chang?”

“Your crush?” Tonks asked wryly as Harry went red. “Don’t worry, Sirius told me all about that.”

“I didn’t know he knew,” Harry asked suspiciously. “I don’t remember telling him –”

“Probably heard it from Ron or the twins,” Tonks said with a shrug. “He was interrogating them about girls a few days after they moved into Grimmauld Place – it was actually pretty entertaining to watch George try to explain to his irate mother what he did with one Alicia Spinnet at the top of the Astronomy Tower.”

Harry groaned. “I don’t even want to know.”

“Figures. So what’s the deal with you and Cho?” Tonks asked with a suggestive wink.

“Stop that, would you? She’s not my girlfriend... and given the way things are, she probably wouldn’t be good for me,” Harry replied with a frustrated breath. “I mean, it’s not like I can confide in her,

particularly with everything that's going on. Hell, I've talked more to you than I have to her."

"Harry," Tonks asked in a sultry tone, "are you asking me out now? I'm flattered –"

Harry put his face in his hands. "I should just learn to stop talking while I'm ahead."

Tonks chuckled. "All right, change of subject then: how are we going to get a corpse? The Ministry's out, and I'm guessing you probably don't want to be exhuming bodies from the Hogsmeade graveyard –"

"That's... that's just wrong," Harry said, disgust spreading across his face. "I'm not going to go dig up dead bodies."

"It would have been the perfect midnight date –"

"Oh, just fuck off."

"When?"

Harry glared at Tonks, who was smirking again. "That was revenge for my line in the library, wasn't it?"

"What, did you actually think you were going to get a free one off on me?" Tonks asked mockingly. "Anyways, since you ruled out grave-robbing, our only real options are getting a fresh body out of St. Mungo's – an option I don't really like, considering the likely condition of those corpses would make diagnostic spells a nightmare – or killing somebody."

Harry went pale. "I'm not... Tonks, we can't just kill somebody! If we got caught –"

"You knew when we started this that finding a body would be the main hitch in the plan," Tonks said grimly. "You knew this question would eventually come up."

“But couldn’t we just transfigure something nonliving and organic into a human corpse?” Harry asked desperately. “I mean, the theory supports it!”

“Harry, that sort of transfiguration is unbelievably complicated,” Tonks said with frustration. “Even if I could do it – and I doubt I could – the number of diagnostic spells would increase exponentially.”

“You keep going on about these spells, Tonks,” Harry said impatiently. “Do we really need all of them?”

Tonks gave him an incredulous look. “Harry, you don’t want a major organ to fail when your consciousness takes root in the body, or your skin to slough off. You need these diagnostic spells; otherwise you could suffer some serious problems here! I mean, from the few accounts of the wizards that actually tried simulamancy, they had some pretty nasty problems with it! Take a look at this – one wizard skipped an internal organs diagnostic, and then died because his stomach lining dissolved.”

Harry swallowed hard. “Didn’t need that image. But aren’t there... I don’t know, better diagnostic spells? More exact, more precise, more likely not to blow up in our faces?”

“That would require more research than we have time for,” Tonks replied heavily. “I’ll try and keep things as concise as we can, but we’ll need to find this body soon – otherwise we’ll have to rule simulamancy out for the time being, and if we want to have any hope of convincing Cassane to side with us – and we need him, considering the power and authority he has right now – we’ll need this magic.”

Harry didn’t say anything as he looked at the heap of papers in front of him.

“We could pray for the Death Eaters to be more active, but even I doubt that’s going to help,” Tonks continued. “Odds are they’d clean up after their mess, particularly considering that they’re still in hiding.”

“I don’t want to have to kill, Tonks, there’s enough blood on my hands already,” Harry whispered.

“Where’s this coming from?” Tonks demanded, her eyebrows shooting up. “You didn’t have a problem before –”

“This is different, Tonks!” Harry said with frustration. “I wasn’t directly responsible for those deaths – they chose to chase me. But this... this is at Voldemort’s level.”

Tonks blew out a breath with frustration. “Harry, let me ask you a little question here: why didn’t you run?”

“What?”

“Why did you choose to come back to Hogwarts in the first place? You had to have known this mess was going to happen? Why didn’t you... hell, I don’t know, run for it or hide out in Grimmauld Place until this all blew over?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Harry asked incredulously. “I’m not going to run from this! Hell, I’m innocent – well, as innocent as I can reasonably be considered. And I’m not going to sacrifice my life to live in fear of wild accusations! And with Dumbledore here, this is one of the few places I know that Voldemort won’t be able to penetrate.”

“Those accusations aren’t exactly wild, and you’re in more danger now than ever,” Tonks said quietly. “Harry, I’m not disagreeing with what you’re doing – close proximity to your greatest allies isn’t something to be discarded lightly – but if you can’t handle simulamancy, you’ve got to consider your other options. And you don’t have many of those.”

“So I have to run...”

“Or you have to kill,” Tonks finished. “We probably won’t have any choice with this, Harry, and if the opportunity presents itself, we can’t back down. So, what’s it going to be?”

Harry was silent for a long few seconds before grimacing. "We'll burn that bridge when we come to it. We still have some time. And if all else fails..." A slow, cold grin crept onto Harry's face. "Well, I can always kill Snape."

"Probably better not to do that just yet," Tonks said nervously, a little unnerved by the wistful look on Harry's face and by the thought of what would happen if Dumbledore found out. "And before you even ask, you can't kill Malfoy either – the body you're possessing needs to be a minimum of five years older than you and one the Metamorphmagus is compatible with. That's one of the main limitations to simulacrum, as a matter of fact."

"Might explain why Voldemort never tried it," Harry muttered. "He wouldn't want to possess a body potentially more decrepit than his own."

"And as far as I know, he never had the services of a Metamorphmagus," Tonks finished. "You're lucky I'm here."

"That's true," Harry said darkly as he turned back to Dumbledore's note. "So you wouldn't happen to be able to explain why exactly Dumbledore's not coming with us?"

"He felt that you wouldn't want him there –"

Harry didn't know how to answer that remark, but Tonks drove the conflicting feelings out of his mind with her next words.

"- And besides, he's busy this afternoon."

"You wouldn't happen to know what with, would you?"

"Knowing Dumbledore, something complicated," Tonks muttered as she began shoving papers and books into her bag. "Come on, let's go get some lunch – you'll need a full stomach if you're cutting these kinds of deals."

"I thought H.A.I.T. members weren't allowed to eat with students."

“So I’ll transform into a cute Hufflepuff sixth year who idolizes the Boy-Who-Lived enough to ignore the Prophet and fantasize about his cute ass.”

Harry went scarlet, and Tonks burst out laughing.

* * *

“And you’re sure about this?” Kemester growled. “Umbridge is actually letting him leave the school?”

“I’ve already told you that,” Larshall replied, wiping the sheen of sweat off his wide forehead. “He’s being escorted by that Tonks girl to meet with legal counsel – which, mind you, is allowed.”

“I thought Umbridge was going to have the Ministry provide some,” Kemester asked suspiciously, closing the heavy book on his desk and looking up at Larshall. “You know, the kind who is more expensive than helpful.”

“Potter’s allowed his own counsel, and by all indications, he can afford it,” Larshall said with a heavy shrug. “Rumor has it he has a fair bit of money.”

Kemester clenched his fist. “Putting aside Potter’s money for a second, are you planning on making an arrest?”

“In Hogsmeade?” Larshall asked, his eyebrows shooting into his hair. “Dmitri, have you lost your mind? It’s not illegal, per say, but if Dumbledore finds out –”

“Potter will already be in your grasp, and then he’ll have little choice but to have a proper Ministry interrogation,” Kemester interrupted, his eyes lighting up. “And Dumbledore, according to the briefing, is having that meeting while Potter’s out, so this could be our perfect opportunity! Potter would never see it coming!” He got to his feet. “Come on, I’ll operate as H.A.I.T.’s representative, and I’ll get you past the patrols –”

“Dmitri, what the – Dmitri, you can’t do this! Bones will eat you alive!”

“Only if she finds out, and only if our interrogation doesn’t turn up the results we need,” Kemester replied succinctly, dropping his books into a tiny bag that Larshall knew had an Undetectable Extension Charm. “And I’ll get what I want.”

“Damn it, Dmitri, you’re going to put both our jobs on the line again! You aren’t even authorized for this investigation, and Umbridge will skin you alive if she finds out!”

Kemester shrugged as he pulled out his hip flask and took a long drag from it. “Trust me, Larshall, this’ll work –”

“You said that the last time and the time before that! Damn it, Kemester, are you trying to destroy our reputations? And how the hell are you supposed to avoid Umbridge? Somebody’s bound to report you!”

Kemester snorted. “Yeah, and the only one who has the balls to do that is Shackbolt, and he’s so far in Dumbledore’s pocket that he won’t inform Umbridge, and considering Dumbledore’s occupied... we’ve got a clean shot.” He drew his wand and gave it an experimental twirl.

“And what about Tonks?” Larshall asked uncertainly. “Can we –”

“She’s not an issue,” Kemester cut him off smoothly, a cold, triumphant smile crossing his face.

“And how did you jump to that conclusion?”

“Because I know, Reed,” Kemester replied calmly, grim certainty settling in his voice. “I recently received the information I need, and she’s exactly where I want her to be.”

* * *

“And you’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure, Draco, I wouldn’t be telling you this if I wasn’t!” Theodore Nott snapped, his dark eyes gleaming as he leaned close to Malfoy – far closer than Malfoy typically allowed any male, but Nott didn’t care. “I saw them leave.”

“So Potter’s out of the school?” Malfoy demanded. “Why?”

“Heard that he’s interviewing legal counsel,” Nott replied with a snicker. “As if that fool could find somebody stupid enough to represent him.”

“Money goes a long way, Nott, and don’t be so quick to disparage it just because your family doesn’t have any,” Malfoy said smoothly as Nott went red. Blaise Zabini just rolled his eyes, as if his ‘friend’s’ petty insults were beneath him.

“And given that Dumbledore’s occupied this afternoon with something in his office, we’ve got time now,” Nott said quickly, stepping back to face the two of them.

“Wait a moment... occupied with who?” Malfoy asked sharply. “And how did you find out about this?”

“Saw Umbridge heading towards the old bastard’s office while I was on my way here, snapping about Dumbledore’s ‘insouciant temerity’.”

“Big words from a little witch,” Zabini drawled.

“And if she catches you saying that, she’ll have you in detention for weeks, and Snape will eviscerate you,” Malfoy snapped. “Careful, Blaise.”

“She’s incompetent and unworthy of any notice.”

“Say that to her face and you’ll be lucky not to become the next fly for her maw.”

“That’s irrelevant, Draco,” Nott said, a disturbingly intense expression spreading across his face. “All that matters is that Dumbledore’s out of the way – at least for now – and so is Potter. Now’s our chance.”

“And what about Snape?” Zabini asked coolly.

“He won’t bother us,” Malfoy replied. “Even if he finds us – which he won’t – he won’t interfere.”

“Good,” Zabini said, smoothly rising to his feet. “Let’s get this over with –”

“And make Hogwarts ours at last,” Nott growled.

* * *

Dumbledore did not consider Barnabus Cuffe to be an imposing figure. The famous (or somewhat infamous, depending on the opinion) editor for the Daily Prophet was hardly prepossessing, with disproportionately short arms and legs. Coupled with the ample beginnings of a sagging gut and the thick neck, Dumbledore thought the man looked unfortunately bloated. His face, surprisingly, was rather handsome, and his dark blonde hair was exceptionally neatly groomed to Dumbledore’s eye.

But it only took one look into the man’s eyes to see the truth – any handsomeness was a tool, and immediately blunted by the pure avariciousness set in the man’s face, coupled with the arrogance of too much success and manipulation for most men to handle.

Horace Slughorn hadn’t made a mistake when he had prophesied that Barnabus Cuffe would go far in life – he had just failed to specify how he would attain his glories.

There was a flicker of green light from behind Dumbledore's desk, but he did not need to turn to recognize the roar of the Floo connection activating – and from the disgusted look crossing Professor McGonagall's face, he knew exactly who had entered the room.

“I'm pleased to see you again, Miss Skeeter. Thank you for coming on such short notice to our little conference.”

Turning, he saw the distinctly harassed Rita Skeeter brush her high-collared turquoise robes free of soot and give Cuffe a perfunctory nod. Dumbledore knew that she hadn't been writing, but it hadn't seen like unemployment had hurt her much in the intervening time, and other than a few jewels missing from her spectacles, she looked as if she was at the height of her career.

“Professor Dumbledore, it is a great pleasure to be called on such short notice,” Rita Skeeter said smoothly, offering her hand to Dumbledore. “Albeit an unexpected one, but I wasn't about to turn down this... opportunity.”

Professor McGonagall's lip was slowly curling, but Dumbledore only gave the reporter a pleasant nod before motioning for her to sit down next to Cuffe.

“Is there any other reporters coming, Dumbledore?” Cuffe asked suddenly, his grin not disguising the irritation in his vaguely nasal voice. “Because I'm a very busy man, you know –”

BANG.

“Well, if it isn't Barnabus Cuffe!” Umbridge exclaimed with a wide smile. She looked distinctly out of breath, as if she had run up the spiral staircase to Dumbledore's office. “Dear Albus never told me that you were going to be meeting with him today!”

“Until yesterday, I didn't know I was going to be meeting with Dumbledore,” Cuffe replied amicably. “So you're representing the Ministry's interests in this case, I would assume?”

“Actually,” McGonagall said tightly, “she wasn’t invited.”

“Now, Minerva, it would only be considered proper to allow me to experience the company of an old friend!” Umbridge said reprovably. “I’m sure that Albus would allow that –”

“My dear Dolores, I fear that Minerva is right,” Dumbledore said pleasantly. “I would hardly be so callous to deny one the company of an old friend, but Mr. Cuffe and I have important business to discuss, and I would be exceptionally grateful if you would allow us to conduct said business.”

Umbridge’s eyes instantly hardened as she turned back to Cuffe. “Well, Barnabus, I’m sure you wouldn’t mind if I sit back and observe your masterful negotiating skills at work –”

Rita Skeeter let out a snort, and Umbridge’s attention finally turned to the reporter. To Dumbledore’s surprise, both women wore expressions of pure loathing as they saw each other.

“I feel, Dolores, that you might have misunderstood Dumbledore’s point,” McGonagall said stiffly. “This is a private meeting between Mr. Cuffe and the Headmaster.”

“You’re here.”

“I’m the Deputy Headmistress, and also responsible for much of Hogwarts’ finance,” McGonagall said curtly. “Positions that will allow me to contribute my expertise to this discussion. Now, if you’d please excuse us.”

Umbridge glared daggers at the Transfiguration Professor. “The Minister,” she began slowly, “would want me to represent the interests of his office –”

“But as of now, my dear Dolores, the affairs regarding Hogwarts and its financial matters remain under the authority of the Headmaster,” Dumbledore said gravely. “Now, if you would be so kind –”

“You can just leave,” Skeeter said sweetly.

Umbridge looked as if she was going to kill something. Wrenching the door open, she stormed out of the office, the door closing tightly behind her.

“You certainly have a flair for the dramatic, Dumbledore,” Cuffe said finally, readjusting his position in the chair and smoothing his robes. “A pity such flair is rendered all but useless these days...”

“Then I can assume you have guessed the intent of this meeting?” Dumbledore asked with a trace of a grin.

“You want an article in the Daily Prophet,” Skeeter said coolly, “and the only reason I’m here is because you want me to write it.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore replied with a nod. “I feel that a series of exclusive interviews can shed some light on the turbulent political events of the past few months.”

“The Prophet has covered said events in great detail,” Cuffe said curtly.

“Although it always seems that my letters to you do not receive print,” Dumbledore said, letting a note of disappointment slide into his voice. “I would really think, that given my... former positions, that such letters would be a boon to the Prophet.”

“Times have changed, Dumbledore,” Cuffe said briskly, “and more interests have to be considered.”

“Like the interest on the Ministry gold that’s piling up in your vault,” Skeeter added with a smirk. “Don’t think I don’t know, Barnabus.”

“Careful, Rita, you wouldn’t want your reputation for honest journalism to be tarnished -”

“I’ve called Miss Skeeter here because she has an excellent reputation for finding out the truth, and sliding through the crannies that people wish to keep hidden,” Dumbledore said, sitting down at his desk and folding his hands.

Skeeter suddenly went very pale. “I wouldn’t go that far, Professor...”

“Regardless, Dumbledore, you know better than anybody that the public mood is against you, particularly given the attack in Diagon Alley and Sirius Black’s recent activity,” Cuffe said, his voice abruptly businesslike. “And as much as I would relish the views of a formerly prestigious wizard like you, I must take other things into consideration.”

“Of course,” Dumbledore said pleasantly. “Now, the series I have planned will cover three Monday editions, complete with photographs and exclusive interviews with myself, and Harry Potter.”

Cuffe’s eyebrows nearly shot into his well-coiffed hair. “You want to give Mr. Potter a voice to the press?”

“As he is justly allowed,” Dumbledore replied. “Miss Skeeter has worked with Harry before, and I’m sure he’ll be amicable to more interviews.”

Professor McGonagall could barely resist a snort at that remark, while Skeeter suddenly looked very eager to hear what Dumbledore was saying.

“And what, exactly, will be discussed in these interviews?” Cuffe asked suspiciously. “Would it have anything to do with... with the ‘return’ of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore replied firmly, “complete with an eyewitness account from Harry himself, and a concise discussion of recent events.”

“Assume that I am interested, for a moment,” Cuffe said carefully after a few seconds of silence. “You realize that such... accounts

could put considerable pressure upon my business, particularly from some very powerful associates of mine who would not care to see fallacies and libel in print.”

“That’s understandable,” Dumbledore replied reasonably. “After all, one must preserve the integrity of his business.”

“Many would view your... allegations as fitting under those categories,” Cuffe said with a trace of a grin. “Dire accusations indeed, and with little proof behind your words.”

“Perhaps more proof than you realize, my friend,” Dumbledore replied.

“Subsequently, to protect the integrity of the Prophet, I must have... insurance, so to speak,” Cuffe said, a trace of a grin on his face. “Here’s my price: one thousand Galleons flat as insurance, five thousand for each article, two thousand as commission for Miss Skeeter, and another two thousand to guarantee the front page.”

McGonagall’s eyes widened, and even Skeeter looked shocked at the outrageous figures that Cuffe had given. Dumbledore only kept his gaze fixed the man sitting across from him, betraying no emotion.

“So, for your first article, that’ll be nine thousand Galleons upfront,” Cuffe finished with an avaricious smile. “And, of course, as the editor, I will be screening your articles for anything that might be... damaging to the paper.”

“This is extortion,” McGonagall snarled.

“And you, Professor, are not the one negotiating,” Cuffe replied back icily. “I’ll direct my comments to Dumbledore.”

“The prices you name are quite steep, Barnabus,” Dumbledore said quietly, “and one might question their fairness.”

“And if you want your articles published in any respectable paper, Dumbledore, you’ll pay,” Cuffe snapped. “You’re in no position to negotiate, and those are my prices. Take them or leave them.”

“Dumbledore, you can’t –” McGonagall went silent at the raise of Dumbledore’s hand, and after a few long seconds, the old wizard sighed.

“I’ll take it.”

Cuffe’s eyes widened for a second before narrowing in cool triumph. “I’ll expect the transfers to my account to be done before any interviews are to begin, and I’m not available for supervision until next Wednesday, so we’ll have to wait until then to begin.”

“Excuse me, Barnabus, but I’m fully capable of interviewing Harry Potter on my own –”

“Rita, my dear, a free spirit is an asset for a writer, but a liability for an editor,” Cuffe replied smoothly, getting to his feet and moving towards the fireplace. “We’ll be in touch.” There was a flash of green flame, and the editor for the Daily Prophet vanished from the room.

Rita Skeeter also got to her feet, a suspicious expression on her face.

“The Dumbledore I knew would have never allowed scum like him to manipulate him.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I’d love to hear an explanation, Dumbledore.”

“I never knew you were so antagonistic towards Barnabus, Rita,” Dumbledore replied, raising an eyebrow. “You used to have unparalleled freedom –”

“Yeah, well... that was before he started playing with big money,” Skeeter muttered, moving towards the fire. “And you don’t even know the half of the truth.”

There was another flash, and Rita Skeeter vanished into the fireplace.

“Albus...” McGonagall began slowly.

“I know, Minerva, but we have no choice,” Dumbledore replied quietly.

“You and I both know we don’t have that kind of money to be casually throwing around, unless you wish to dip into the Hogwarts vaults, and you know my opinion on that.”

“I do.”

“It would be easier to begin training Mr. Potter now, if only to prepare him –”

“Minerva, I wish with all my heart that I could be helping Harry, but there is only so much I can do while Umbridge and H.A.I.T. are at the school, and my position grows more precarious every day – a position you know I cannot jeopardize for all our sakes. And Harry is proving far more capable than even I would have imagined.” He sighed heavily, and to his eyes, he had never felt so tired, so old. “As of now, I can only circumspectly provide aid and protection – and with his potential and drive, that should be all he requires.”

“There are things you could teach him that nobody else could, Albus” McGonagall said quietly.

“And I do plan to teach him... I just hope he’ll be ready when that time comes.”

“And what of Cuffe?”

Dumbledore smiled. “He’ll receive everything he wants – and perhaps a little bit more.”

* * *

“Well, that went well,” Tonks said cheerfully as they walked back up towards Hogwarts. “That’s one down, three more to go!”

“That was disturbingly easy, Tonks,” Harry said, running his hand through his hair. “He was practically fawning on me, and that contract seemed to pop up a little too quickly.”

“Hey, I read it over, and you’re fine, Harry,” Tonks reassured him. “It was just a little something to protect your identity and your royalties you’ll be getting from the advertisement – which, might I add, are considerable in themselves.”

“The photographs were weird, though, you can’t deny that,” Harry protested. “I mean, how many times and from how many different angles can they have me straddle a broomstick? It’s ridiculous –”
CRACK.

Harry’s hand shot to his wand, but Tonks had already drawn hers and was pointing it at the man standing in front of them – no, staggering in front of them –

“Harry... Harry! Oh god...”

And before Harry could even start moving, Charlie Weasley collapsed in the dirt.

“Damn it, Charlie!” Tonks cried, running over to where the second oldest Weasley son was lying on the road, coughing and sputtering. He was bleeding – badly – from dozens of cuts all over his body, and both of his eyes were swollen purple from bruising. His robes were soaked with blood, and Harry could hear a wet rattle from his every breath.

“Charlie, speak to me here!” Tonks said anxiously, drawing her wand and pointing it at the wounds on his face, which slowly began to close. “What the hell happened to you? I thought you were in Romania!”

“I was... this morning... Dumbledore gave me a mission, but everything... everything went to hell... she’s dead, Tonks, she’s dead...”

“Who’s dead?” Tonks exclaimed, waving her wand frantically as she tried to heal the wounds on Charlie’s neck, which were bleeding copiously.

“Marchbanks... he killed her, Tonks, and I couldn’t... just couldn’t stop him. Tonks, they’re coming... they’re coming!”

Harry’s face went white. “We’ve got to get him to Hogwarts, he needs Madam Pomphrey. Here, let me give you a hand –”

“No, wait –”

But Harry had taken a firm hold of Charlie’s right arm and pulled.

There was a wet, sodden crunch, a spray of blood, and screams from Tonks and Charlie, and Harry was suddenly holding onto Charlie’s right arm...

And it was not connected to Charlie.

“That... that can’t be good,” Charlie whispered. Then his eyes rolled back in his skull, and he pitched over in a dead faint.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Harry whispered, gingerly holding onto the severed limb. “Tonks, help me here...”

“His blood’s not clotting!” Tonks cried, pointing her wand again and again at the bleeding stump below Charlie’s shoulder. “We need a Healer, and we’ve got to move! Otherwise –”

CRACK. CRACK.

“There he is!” a large, heavily muscled masked man yelled. “And he’s with Potter! Kill them!”

Harry could only duck as three curses shot over his head. Swearing madly, he wrenched his wand free.

“Stupefy!”

But the Death Eaters blocked the spell with a laugh and began moving forward. Very real panic began surging through Harry’s veins, even as Charlie’s blood was pumping out onto the road –

“Expulso!” Tonks screamed, pointing her wand at the ground in front of the Death Eaters. A second later, Harry could barely see through the cloud of dust and grit that had erupted in front of them. He could hear the Death Eaters swearing, and Tonks screaming more curses. He crouched low and began to take aim –

“Get Charlie under cover!” Tonks shouted. “Now! Hurry!”

Spinning on her heel, she shot a silvery burst of light towards the castle, and Harry knew that she was sending for help. Gritting his teeth, he placed Charlie’s arm upon his chest and, groaning with the effort, staggered towards the rocks –

“Confringo!”

“PROTEGO!”

Harry instinctively ducked as something white and hot sliced past his face, and he stumbled, nearly dropping Charlie as the bolt howled past his cheek. Tonks had managed to deflect the attack, but the dust was clearing...

“Incrucio!”

“Glisseo!”

Harry heard muffled swearing as the Death Eater’s attack went wide as the ground turned slick as ice beneath his feet. Struggling to carry Charlie with every step, he finally dropped behind a boulder and carefully slid the stocky young man to the ground –

“REDUCTO!”

Shards exploded outwards as Harry fell backwards, reeling from the spell that slammed into the rock only inches away from where he was. Swearing under his breath, he aimed down at the closest Death Eater.

“Stupefy!”

The Death Eater didn’t manage to block the spell this time, and the force of the red bolt sent him flat on his back. But the two cloaked figures remaining turned towards the rock...

“Get down!”

Harry ducked behind the rock, as two green streaks of light screamed past, blasting smoking holes in the boulders behind him. A second later, Tonks appeared with a crack next to Harry, breathing hard and crouching as low as she could.

“How did they find us?” Harry shouted as two flashes of white-blue light erupted through the air, causing four boulders next to them to explode violently, peppering the scene with rubble and smoke. “How could they follow Charlie?”

“Tracking Charm!” Tonks yelled, reaching around the cover to shoot another spell at the Death Eater, who narrowly deflected the jet of white-hot light. “Probably never saw it coming –”

“Atrium charm levitas!”

Harry felt himself flying as the rock they were hiding behind exploded. The air stank of ozone, and his ears were ringing as he slammed against a nearby pine wedged between the rocks. He could feel the pain already starting as he slumped into the pine needles, his clothes smoking from the blast, his glasses shattered in their frames...

But then he heard a voice, echoing through the pain in his head...

“Black, he’s yours.”

A shadow fell over him. Harry looked up, barely able to comprehend what he was seeing. No, it's impossible... no, it can't be...

The man removed his Death Eater mask, to reveal a twisted face, hollowed by years in Azkaban... and a terrible smile on his face.

"It would be," Sirius Black whispered, "my pleasure, Macnair. Avada Kedavra!"

But Harry was already moving, grabbing for the ankles as the green light erupted from the wand and screamed towards the tree...

CRACK.

He landed hard on the gravel, the spot where Sirius Black had been empty. A wild cackle split the air, and Harry looked up to see his godfather standing on a nearby boulder, his eyes wild with glee.

"Just don't give up now, do you, Harry? Somes effrego!"

Harry was flat on the ground, he knew he didn't have a chance to dodge the orange ray streaking from the wand, and whatever the spell was, he knew he couldn't dodge this one –

CRACK.

The blast didn't come, and Harry looked up, only to see the grotesquely twisted arm of Charlie Weasley fall with a wet thud onto the straggly grass, blood spraying from every unhealed cut. Harry gaped with shock. How...

"Flamma lacero!"

Harry could only watch in amazement as Sirius ducked under the slash of fire erupting from Tonks' wand. Her hair was charred black, her body covered with soot and dust, and her eyes blazed with fury as she slashed her wand down again, sending another white-hot flaming stroke through the air.

Sirius waved his wand lazily, and before Harry's astonished eyes, the fire winked out existence, leaving nothing behind but burnt air and smoking grass –

“Black, we've got to get out of here, there's somebody coming from the school!” the third Death Eater shouted, having been revived by the heavily muscled man that Harry recognized as Walden Macnair.

“Of course,” Sirius said lightly, jumping down from the rock even as Tonks threw another curse at it. With a mocking bow towards Harry, he Disapparated with a crack, the other two Death Eaters vanishing a second later.

He heard running footsteps, and heard Tonks' voice, ragged from screaming curses.

“Harry? Harry, get up... speak to me, Harry, you've got to get up!”

“What the fuck happened here?” another voice shouted, shock and fury competing for prominence. “Damn it, Larshall, get a Patronus to the school and get H.A.I.T. over here, we've got a situation on our hands!”

“But Dmitri –”

“JUST DO IT!”

Harry slowly pulled himself to his feet, unsteadily leaning on Tonks as she helped him up.

“Where's Charlie?” he whispered.

“Unconscious, and bleeding out fast, we need to get him to the Hospital Wing,” Tonks whispered back quickly. “Kemester, tell them to get a medical team down there, we've got a severely injured civilian here!”

Harry's eyes snapped wide open. He watched as Kemester yelled orders at Larshall as he approached, his ragged orange hair fluttering around his ears...

The two stared at each other for a long few seconds, their expressions unreadable.

Finally Kemester stepped forward and looked Harry in the eye. Tonks stepped back, her eyes wary. Harry just staggered slightly as his mind tried to process everything he'd seen...

"Harry Potter," Kemester said quietly, "I never thought I'd see you quite like this."

"Nor did I," Harry replied, breathing heavily against the pains in his chest.

He moved suddenly, slamming his hand onto Harry's shoulder. His entire body screamed with pain as Kemester sidestepped around him, yanking his arms behind his back and pinning them in a lock.

"And you're under arrest."

Author's Note: I blame the cliffhanger last chapter for this incredible update speed for this chapter. I didn't want to leave you all hanging TOO long, after all. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“What the fuck, you bastard –”

SMACK.

Harry reeled from the force of Kemester's backhand hit and staggered backwards, against the dark stone wall of the room the two had Apparated into. But the Hit Wizard wasn't done with Harry – taking an iron grip on his shoulder, he wrenched Harry forward and slammed him into the heavy metal table bolted to the floor in the center of the room.

“Like that, Potter?” Kemester snarled, knocking Harry's wild punch aside and elbowing him in the mouth for good measure. “What's the matter, you can't back up your tough talk and tough money with a hit?”

Harry spat blood, glared daggers at Kemester, and with a roar, tried to slam his shoulder into Kemester's chest. But the Hit Wizard saw the attack, and with the dexterity brought from years of training, twisted Harry's momentum and shoved him into the table again. Grabbing hold of Harry's hair, the Hit Wizard gave Harry's head a slam against the table for good measure.

Harry howled with pain and tried desperately to kick for Kemester's groin, but the older man smoothly sidestepped and with the pull of a lever, brought something that looked like a set of roughly riveted metal gauntlets down on Harry's forearms and hands – except this device sealed itself to the table with a click, leaving Harry's arms wrenched down on the table.

With a satisfied grunt, Kemester raised his wand, and Harry felt his legs get knocked out from underneath his body as a stone chair materialized out of the floor, shoving him into a crude sitting position. Looking through his shattered glasses, Harry saw Kemester walk to

the other end of the table and face him, a cold, triumphant smile on his face.

“Looks like I win.”

“Bite me, you bastard –”

“Rather not, sorry,” Kemester said icily, leaning forward. “And don’t even waste your time pulling yourself free. See those blades at the end?”

Harry looked down to see his arms sheathed in metal up to his elbows – where, just above them, two sharp, curved blades were locked into place.

“You try and yank yourself free, those blades drop, and you’ll be bereft of both arms, instead of just the one,” Kemester hissed, leaning close, so Harry could see every inch of the man’s craggy face. “So you’re mine till we’re through, got it?”

Harry spat a mouthful of blood into the man’s face, only to get another backhand blow across the face. He felt his nose crunch, and another fresh stream of blood trickled down to his lips.

Kemester wiped the blood off his face as he glared down at Harry. “And it certainly took long enough to get you here. Do you know how hard I’ve fought to get this?”

“I’m not saying anything,” Harry growled. “I want a lawyer.”

Kemester laughed openly at that, the mocking sound nearly driving Harry forward. The noise echoed in the dimly lit room, and for the first time, Harry wondered where the hell he was.

“You think you’re getting legal counsel now?” Kemester said, his eyes gleaming as he began walking around the table. “Well, I’ve got news for you, Potter – where we are, the only place you’ll be getting your counsel will be in a Wizengamot courtroom – and we aren’t too far from one of those. And as soon as Fudge knows you’re here and

can assemble a quorum, you'll be carted off to Azkaban where you belong."

So I'm in some sort of interrogation room at the Ministry, Harry thought wildly, spotting the heavy iron door directly in front of him. He swallowed hard when he noticed that the door didn't have any hinges – or a latch. How the hell can I get out –

"And the funny thing is that the second you stepped out of Hogwarts, you sealed your fate," Kemester said, his voice filled with smug satisfaction. "Out of Dumbledore's protection, out of his reach –"

"No court will convict me, you've got no evidence!" Harry snarled, his legs twisting around the chair, hoping that somehow he could knock it free so he could extricate his arms.

Kemester raised an eyebrow as he stepped forward, his unkempt orange hair shining in the torchlight. "You really want to go down that road, Potter? You really want to cross that line?"

"You can't tie me to anything –"

"Let's start at the beginning, shall we?" Kemester spat, grabbing Harry's hair again and wrenching him back. "You fled from the Ministry just a bit more than a month ago, and my brother died because of it – along with three good men who I called friends."

"They chose to chase me," Harry growled.

A second later, he regretted the words, as Kemester had brutally slammed Harry's head into the table again.

"They were doing their jobs, Potter!" Kemester snarled. "You've never lost someone like a brother before, have you? You won't know what it feels like to know that you can never look into your brother's eyes again, because he got fucking decapitated by a Muggle aeroplane! Bartholomew was my only brother, Potter, and don't you dare deny the blame for his death!" He punctuated the words with

another punch that left Harry lurching in the chair, struggling to avoid the blades that would take off his arms if he rose.

“But that wasn’t enough, was it?” Kemester whispered, his eyes blazing as he began walking around the table again. “No, you weren’t satisfied with manslaughter, so you broke into Gringotts – collaborating with a criminal all the while. And the disgusting thing is, I should have expected it, though why you would work with a psychopath like Black is beyond me. And I nearly got you that day too – I nearly found you at your little hideaway, and if it wasn’t for Scrimgeour, you would have been in Azkaban weeks ago!”

“You’ve got no evidence to connect me to Gringotts,” Harry growled. “You can’t prove anything. And as soon as Scrimgeour finds out that I’m down here, he’s going to –”

“He can’t interfere – not this time,” Kemester said with a twisted smile. “Not like the last time – I knew that trial was a sham, but your money can only take you so far, Potter!”

Harry tried to prevent his eyes from widening – how much did Kemester really know? “So you’re saying that I bribed Rufus Scrimgeour, Kemester?” he asked, forcing a derisive laugh. “Honestly, how stupid can you get?”

“I wasn’t the only one who knew something was wrong in that courtroom,” Kemester hissed, “and it’s all making sense, too – in exchange for Black helping you, you accorded him a little act of terrorism. You didn’t blow up Ollivander’s – he did!”

Harry did laugh this time, at the sheer ludicrousness of Kemester’s reasoning. “And place myself that close to the blast radius? I’m not an idiot, Kemester, despite how much you appear to be!”

Kemester’s next hit landed with an audible crunch across Harry’s jaw, and he felt teeth get knocked loose. He reeled in his chair from the hit – only to meet the next punch in mid-swing, knocking him back in his chair. Pain exploded across his face, and he could taste blood in his mouth. He wondered, in the back of his mind, when Kemester would

break out the Cruciatus Curse. Then again, he wouldn't risk compromising his case... but if I get him angry enough, he could make a mistake... I've just got to stay conscious...

"But you made a mistake bombing Ollvander's, Potter," Kemester said, a note of grim triumph in his voice as he grabbed Harry's hair again. "We tracked your explosives, and we knew it was you behind the attacks. So when you tried to head for Dumbledore's sanctuary, we were waiting."

"And that did so much good," Harry said with a mirthless grin as he spat blood again. "You just lost more people there – do you like throwing people into a meat grinder, Kemester? Do you really have that much disregard for other lives?"

Kemester's face went red with rage and Harry prepared himself for another hit, but Kemester didn't punch him this time. Harry cautiously looked up, only to see Kemester's eyes darken, as if they had seen something unpleasant.

"Oh, I see what game you're playing, Potter," he muttered, turning away towards the door. "You want me to hit you so much that it's obvious, that disorderly conduct charges can be filed against me, that you can have me thrown off H.A.I.T. and out of the Hit Wizards... a clever plan, Potter, but I'm not stupid."

"Despite all the evidence on the contrary –"

"Potter, I've got the puzzle pieces, and they're finally fitting together," Kemester said softly, leaning close. "You've been working with Black since the beginning – and when you went to meet with him today, something went wrong. You had a falling-out... and now he's hungry for your blood." Kemester gave a harsh laugh. "And you told Dumbledore you were looking for 'legal counsel'."

Harry shook his head with incredulity, spitting another mouthful of blood onto the floor. He could hardly believe what he was hearing – Kemester had used a bad premise, logically inferred, and jumped to entirely the wrong conclusion.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped up. “So you admit that I wasn’t responsible for the Ollivander’s explosion! Then why are you still holding me here? Isn’t that against the law or something?”

“You collaborate with Black, you share his sentence – and you’ve got a slew of crimes to add here – I think we can start with obstruction of justice, resisting arrest, and manslaughter to name a few,” Kemester growled. “And this time, there’s no hiding under Dumbledore’s security blanket.”

“And what makes you think you have enough evidence?” Harry snapped, anger rising in his gut. “You don’t have a shred of proof to tie me to Sirius Black, and you know it better than I do!”

“There’s a way to resolve that,” Kemester growled, slamming both fists down on the table. “Where’s Black, Potter?”

Harry glared back at him. “I don’t know – and I wouldn’t tell you even if I did!”

“Already admitting you collaborated with him?” Kemester snarled swiftly.

“More like you’re a massive tosser that I’m telling a damned thing!” Harry spat. “Have you even bothered to think that my attacker back on the road wasn’t Sirius Black? Why would he attack me if he helped me before?”

“You tell me, Potter!” Kemester roared, his temper finally exploding. “Why you would protect a homicidal maniac remains beyond me anyways! But please, tell me who you think it really is, instead of your dear friend Sirius!”

“Death Eaters!” Harry yelled furiously, straining against the desire not to throttle the Hit Wizard. “It’s not him!”

“Prove it! Unless...” Kemester’s face twisted into a hideous scowl. “Unless, of course, you’re going to say that You-Know-Who himself ordered it, that he’s back, that he seeks your blood yet again!”

“It’s possible!” Harry said angrily, a sudden chill surging down his back. It couldn’t have been Sirius, he knew that – Voldemort couldn’t have gotten to him if he had stayed inside Grimmauld Place. It must be some sort of disguise, some sort of misdirection to throw me off...

“Sure,” Kemester sneered. “Another excuse. Another desperate attempt to avoid taking responsibility for the deaths you’ve caused, the lives you’ve ruined. I’m sure Cedric Diggory would feel so proud of what you’ve done.”

White-hot rage surged through Harry. He’d never hated anybody more than he hated Kemester in that second. “Well, I’m sure you ruined your brother’s life plenty before he had the misfortune to end it – maybe he just wanted it –”

SMACK.

Kemester’s punches came in a hard, hot flurry, sending pain exploding through his jaw and across his neck. He felt his hair in Kemester’s white-knuckled grip, and before he could even say a word, he felt his head slam violently into the metal table, and he heard no more.

* * *

Reed Larshall didn’t often panic, but the second he saw Kemester grab Harry Potter and Disapparate, he knew that panic would be a very appropriate response. He’s going to kill him – and that’ll ruin everything! He’ll lose everything, and I’ll go down with him!

He heard Tonks’ wordless scream of frustration and rage, and before he could even react, he felt the Auror’s hand on his collar.

“Where’s he gone, Larshall?” Tonks said in a deadly voice. “Where the hell did Kemester take him, Larshall?”

“I don’t know, Tonks, I don’t know!” Larshall replied, looking wildly around. “If I would have to guess, he probably went to the Ministry –”

Tonks swore violently. “We need to get Charlie up to the school – Dumbledore’s going to be on his way and I hope to Merlin that you got the rest of H.A.I.T. too –”

“I did –”

“Because Charlie’s dying of some sort of anemic curse, and I can’t reverse it!” They hurried over to the blood-stained patch of ground where Charlie lay, bleeding and moaning in pain.

“Damn, he’s going fast,” Larshall said anxiously, drawing his wand. “You can’t stabilize –”

“I’m not a Healer, Larshall!” Tonks said furiously, getting back to her feet and looking quickly up the road. “I think H.A.I.T.’s coming down the road – and I think Dumbledore’s with them!”

CRACK.

“Where’s Charlie? Let me get a look at him!” Kingsley Shacklebolt asked sharply, shoving Larshall out of the way as he drew his wand. “And where’s Potter?”

Larshall and Tonks exchanged looks at the sight of the grave expression on Dumbledore’s face.

“Kemester,” Larshall said in a strained voice.

Dumbledore closed his eyes. “You did not stop him, Larshall?”

“Professor, please –”

Dumbledore turned to Tonks. “You know what must be done. And I will want an explanation.”

Tonks swallowed hard at the hard expression on the Headmaster's face. "Okay." Spinning on her heel, she Disapparated.

Dumbledore turned back to the gathered H.A.I.T. members, many of whom were trying – and failing – to reverse the curse on Charlie.

"I assume you all brought brooms?" At the nodded response, Dumbledore pointed towards the castle. "Fly to the Hospital Wing with Mr. Weasley immediately. Where's his arm?"

"I've got it," a scarred Auror by the name of Wilson said as he gingerly picked up the severed limb. There was a sick crunching sound as he moved it in his hand. "I... uh, I don't think this is in any condition to be reattached –"

"Madam Pomfrey is one of the best Healers in the country, and if anybody can do it, she will be the one," Dumbledore replied tensely.

"Professor Dumbledore, I don't have a broom," Larshall said tentatively. "How am I –"

"You will be returning to the Ministry immediately and informing the Minister of this development," Dumbledore said. "Instruct him that it is necessary to proclaim a state of emergency and mobilize the full corps of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Larshall nodded. "That makes sense, and if Black's capable of this, he's probably –"

"Black?" Dumbledore asked sharply. "Sirius Black was spotted here?"

"He was the one who attacked Potter!" Larshall exclaimed. "He and two others...I'd recognize Black anywhere!"

Dumbledore eyed Larshall for a long few seconds. "Yes, I'm sure you would." He turned to the rest of H.A.I.T. "Once you have Mr. Weasley in the Hospital Wing, contact the rest of the Weasley family. Do not expect to find the twins – they will already know."

Larshall opened his mouth with confusion, but Kingsley spoke first.

“And you, Professor?”

“I’ll meet you in the Hospital Wing shortly. For now, I must reinforce Hogwarts,” Dumbledore replied curtly. He Disapparated with a whirl of his cloak, leaving the group of flabbergasted Aurors and Hit Wizards behind.

* * *

“Professor Flitwick, I’m going to need the Weasley twins for the rest of the day,” Tonks said tersely, barging into the room. “As in now.”

At the expression on Tonks’ face, Flitwick knew better than to ask questions. “Go with Miss Tonks, boys,” he said in his squeaky voice, “and be careful.”

Fred and George exchanged confused glances as they left the classroom. Probably has been the first time they’ve been pulled out of class instead of being thrown out, Tonks thought to herself.

“Tonks, what’s going on?” Fred asked the second the door closed. “I mean, I’m not complaining, mind you, but –”

“Not here!” Tonks hissed, pulling both of them into a nearby broom cupboard and kicking a startled Ms. Norris out of it.

“Well, we’ve always wanted to be in a broom cupboard with a Metamorphmagus,” George muttered.

“Shut up, you two, this is deadly serious,” Tonks said sharply. “Your brother’s in trouble – big trouble.”

“What, Ron?” Fred asked with a frown. “What did he do now?”

“It’s Charlie, Fred,” Tonks said anxiously. “Look, I can’t tell you everything – I’m only telling you this much because Dumbledore thought I could use you two –”

“What happened to Charlie?” George demanded. “Is he okay?”

“He Apparated onto the path from Hogsmeade bleeding from a dozen attacks,” Tonks said in a low voice. “And once the Death Eaters were finished, he was missing an arm and dying on the rocks.”

Both twins went pale.

“There are Death Eaters in Hogsmeade?” Fred asked, swallowing hard.

“Forget them, Fred, is Charlie going to be okay?” George asked fearfully.

“It looks bad... really bad,” Tonks said, clenching both her fists. “But that’s not why I’m here – I need both of you, more specifically your little magical stones that emit fields and willing participation in something that’s most definitely illegal.”

“What about Charlie?” George asked quickly, looking sick. “If he’s dying, he needs us –”

“There’s nothing we can do about him, Madam Pomfrey’s doing everything she can,” Tonks said tensely.

“He’s in the Hospital Wing?” Fred asked, turning towards the door, but Tonks drew her wand and sealed the door with a wave.

“You can see him after we’re done – you two are the best for this kind of job –”

“You’re telling us we can’t see Charlie because of some stupid job?” Fred asked incredulously. “He’s our brother, and he’s dying!”

“The Order needs this, Fred –”

“We don’t give a damn about your dumb Order!” George shouted furiously. “This is our brother dying here!”

“Listen to me!” Tonks growled. “You wanted to join the Order, you two? Well, this is a part of it – you’ve got to think of the mission! And right now, the mission is the first priority – Harry’s been arrested, and we need to get him out of there.”

“Surely he can wait until after we see our dying brother!” Fred snarled.

“Not with Kemester interrogating him, he can’t!” Tonks shot back. “And if we want to have any shot of getting him out before he winds up in Azkaban or dead from ‘interrogation complications’, we’ve got to move!”

“Do you even know where he is in the Ministry?”

“I will,” Tonks said grimly. “Dumbledore’s going to activate a deep-cover agent to get Harry out of there – hopefully, we’ll have enough time.”

“And if we don’t?”

Tonks shivered. “I don’t even want to think about that.”

* * *

Kemester stepped back away from the unconscious Harry Potter and cautiously surveyed him. He was still breathing, but only just. He certainly wasn’t going anywhere.

He was disgusted – both with Potter and with himself. He had let his anger get the better of him, and even though he couldn’t deny the powerful rush of pleasure he had felt by slamming Potter’s head into the table, he knew that if Potter was seen in this condition, he would be in deep trouble. Particularly as he didn’t have a warrant... Umbridge

should be able to smooth that over, or we can use the previous warrants that I got for Larshall, but even still that's a complication...

He thought, suddenly, of Kingsley Shacklebolt. He knew that with Black on the loose in England, the Auror was either guilty of gross incompetence or collaboration with the criminal. Just as I've suspected all along, he thought with a smug smirk of triumph. His career's over...

"As is yours, if you are seen with Potter in that condition," a voice said from directly behind him – a drawling voice that defied all of Kemester's reason.

He spun on his heel to see a floating impossibility. It's not possible, he can't be here – he's bound to Hogwarts –

Peeves waved jauntily at the Hit Wizard with a twisted smile on his face. "Miss me?"

"How... how the hell –"

"Ask me no questions, Dmitri, and I'll, ah, tell you no lies," Peeves said, his smile growing impossibly wide. "Of course, I'd probably not tell you the truth either – but that'd be the way you'd want it, after all."

"What are you talking about, you damned polter –"

"I'm talking about the fact that you just beat Harry Potter and knocked him out," Peeves gloated wickedly. "Oh, I can see the headlines now... you know, I love watching people go above and beyond in their work, but this just takes the cake..."

Both of Kemester's hands were clenched into fists, but he knew, deep in the empty pit of his stomach, that Peeves was horribly right. His career was over if Bones found out...

"And even if the cake is not a lie," Peeves added with a cackle, "Potter has some powerful friends – not in the least is his godfather. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see what you did to him..."

“So he has been collaborating with Black!” Kemester shouted triumphantly. “I knew it!”

Peeves tilted his incorporeal head sideways, his smile transforming into a satisfied smirk. “And you know what the best part of all this is?”

“What?” Kemester asked, leaning against the wall, secure in his logical victory.

“The Unspeakables know you’re here.”

Kemester sprang up, a wild expression on his face. “What?”

“You know, are you really allowed to speak about the Unspeakables?” Peeves mused, floating around the table. “Or are they the ones not allowed to speak? I’ve never had the pleasure of asking –”

“How did they find me?” Kemester yelled. “These interrogation rooms haven’t been used for almost thirteen years!”

Peeves gave Kemester a stern look. “Dmitri, you’re inside the Department of Mysteries – the Department that has none of that accountability that you’ve got the misfortune to have to deal with, so where else would all those little cops build their private hideaways to take their accumulated scum?”

“So they’re coming?” Kemester said, very real panic on his face. “Oh shit, oh shit –”

“Slow down a bit, you’ll give yourself a heart attack,” Peeves said with a devilish wink. “Let’s not, ah, blow this out of proportions here – the Unspeakables want Potter for their own purposes, and when he’s unconscious, it’s all the better.”

“Why would they want him?”

Peeves frowned. “Something to do with... hmm, might have been that missing prophecy about him in their halls. Oh, and they want to run

some tests on him too, and you already removed their need for a sedative! Congratulations!”

Kemester looked around the room frantically. All of his plans to keep Potter secluded until he could talk to Fudge were crumbling. “I can’t be seen here! Not now, I need more time!”

“Well, I can see you here,” Peeves said, feigning confusion as he floated around the room. “Although you really might want to leave... those Unspeakables might consider your presence an invitation for additional tests on you –”

“I’ll Disapparate out of here, and leave Potter to them,” Kester reasoned, gritting his teeth. Suddenly, he grinned. “And after they’re done with him, he’ll be begging for Azkaban...”

Peeves’ eyes glinted. “Good plan, I think. Oh, and Dmitri?”

“What?”

“I was right,” Peeves hissed with a demonic smile, and his voice dropped another octave. “You do thrive in the darkness, in the rooms filled with flickering torchlight... after all, where else to see your true self?”

And with a wild cackle that send a horrible chill down Kester’s spine, the poltergeist shot through the wall, his last laugh echoing horribly in the room.

* * *

Severus Snape leaned back against the edge of his chair, a thin sheen of sweat on his face as he worked to control his breathing. “The curse is broken – or as much as it can be.”

“Thank you, Severus,” Dumbledore said quietly from his position at the end of Charlie’s bed. “His arm cannot be replaced, though?”

“Not from a curse like Macnair’s,” Snape muttered. “That’s Dark magic that even I haven’t seen before – but given the fact that the man’s an executioner, I’m not surprised he knows this brand of magic. And considering that every bone in that arm is in slivers the size of my fingernail, I wouldn’t dare try to reattach it anyways.”

“That spell doesn’t seem like Macnair’s style, if I remember correctly,” Dumbledore said softly. “Another Death Eater, or a foreign agent hired, I wonder...”

“Was it Black?” Snape spat. “Did the dog break your collar? It’s not so hard to believe, considering his mind was half-broken before I left —”

“Voldemort will want us to think that it is Sirius,” Dumbledore replied heavily, “and given the most recent circumstances, we will have no way to verify it.”

“It’s just a matter of going to Headquarters to check!” Snape said impatiently. “Surely that’s not that difficult – just get your pet werewolf to do it —”

“Grimmauld Place has been sealed off,” Dumbledore said heavily. “Lord Voldemort has been working some esoteric magic indeed – and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has a leak that must be plugged.”

Snape’s eyes widened, and then narrowed. “Nothing can get past the Fidelius Charm, Dumbledore, and you know very well that I have not had the opportunity to betray us.”

“In the files relating to Kingsley’s arrest and the previous case against Harry Potter, a scrap of paper was painstakingly reconstructed using Arithmancy magic. The fragment was used to track Harry to Grimmauld Place, and if my guess is correct, it was appropriated by one of his agents. Although the number was not revealed, Lord Voldemort now knows the rough location of the Order Headquarters – but that was all he needed. He cast an exceptionally powerful shielding spell over the entire road, preventing any form of

magical communication or transportation into or out of that area. It also boasts a terrifically powerful wizard-repelling charm that I've never seen before – and a failsafe woven through all the magic that I dare not activate.”

Snape's eyes narrowed. “What failsafe?”

“It is a blend of Spanish and Italian magic, crafted centuries ago by desperate wizards fleeing the Inquisition and who would rather die than fall into the hands of the enemy.” Dumbledore's face was grim. “If one of the charms fails without the careful disarming of the failsafe – from the inside – the entire area within the radius of the charms is annihilated.”

Snape was silent for a few seconds. “So the rumor has been confirmed, then – the Dark Lord is appropriating magic from the continent.”

“It is as we feared,” Dumbledore said heavily. “And as Charlie is in this condition, I would guess that his mission was a failure – Gertrude Marchbanks is dead, and Harry's chances for acquittal grow slimmer.”

“I thought Potter was arrested!”

Dumbledore gave Snape a very small smile. “Now, Severus, you don't think I was not prepared for this possibility? Harry Potter will be back at Hogwarts soon, don't worry.”

“You couldn't just let the Wizengamot decide this?” Snape snarled. “You just had to rescue him?”

“There would have been no decision, Severus, you and I both know that,” Dumbledore replied seriously, “and if Harry was to be sent to Azkaban... I do not need to tell you of the danger, then.”

If you only knew, Snape thought to himself, turning away from Dumbledore. “I still think –”

BANG.

“Where’s Charlie?” Arthur Weasley said, his face white with fear. “Damn it, where’s my son?”

“He’s right here, Arthur,” Dumbledore said quickly, moving to where he and his wife were standing, along with a pale-faced Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. “He was gravely wounded –”

Molly Weasley burst into tears as she shoved her way past Dumbledore to where Charlie was lying, unconscious, badly scared, and missing an arm, on the white sheets. “Charlie, speak to me! Charlie!”

“Mrs. Weasley, he will be all right,” Snape said coolly, rising to his feet. “The anemia curse was reversed, and I was able to heal many of his wounds. He is resting now. His scars, on the other hand... well, he’ll match well with Moody when we decide to take new photographs.”

“Severus,” Dumbledore said warningly. “That’s enough.”

But before Dumbledore could say anymore, the door burst open again, revealing none other than the squat form of Dolores Umbridge, with two grim-faced H.A.I.T. members right behind her.

“Where’s Potter?” she demanded as she swept into the room. “I expected to see him here, given the recent attack!”

“Your Hit Wizard Kemester has taken care of that, Dolores,” Dumbledore said coolly, and Snape felt a terrible chill run down his spine as he saw the hard look of anger on Dumbledore’s face. The old man’s blue eyes were blazing with fury as he approached the woman, and Snape knew in a second why the Dark Lord had feared Dumbleodre. “As soon as the Death Eaters –”

“Black’s Death Eaters,” Umbridge interrupted, her eyes glittering.

“ - Had fled, Kemester arrested Harry and Disapparated,” Dumbledore finished, his voice icy. “I would like to know if you gave him this authority, Dolores, because I certainly did not.”

“Potter chose to leave the school,” Umbridge began haughtily, “and he was liable for arrest the second he stepped off out of the Hogwarts grounds.”

“He was under the escort of an Auror!” Hermione shouted angrily, rising to his feet from his position beside Charlie. “And you didn’t have a warrant –”

“Hermione, hold your tongue,” Mr. Weasley warned, but Umbridge looked smug.

“Unfortunately, Miss Granger, you are incorrect, because we certainly did have a warrant for Potter’s arrest – one that Kemester obtained from me before the term began.”

“I will want to see the dates on that warrant,” Dumbledore said calmly, “because if it is invalid, Kemester has committed a grave crime indeed.”

“You’ll find them quite valid, Professor,” Umbridge said, her voice just as calm as she pulled an official-looking piece of paper from her purple cardigan. “Just as you’ll find the dates on this warrant just as valid.”

“What is that for?” Snape asked sharply.

Dumbledore carefully unfolded the parchment and read it. A few second later, he looked up and met Umbridge’s smug, pouchy eyes with a very dangerous expression. “You should not have done this, Dolores.”

“What does the warrant say?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“It is a warrant for the arrest of one Charles Weasley.”

There was a split second of silence before –

“How dare you?” Ginny screamed. “Can’t you see he’s nearly dying here?”

“That’s out of line!” Mr. Weasley shouted. “Completely unjust!”

“YOU EVIL WOMAN!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked. “HOW DARE YOU DO THIS TO MY SON! I’M GOING TO –”

“What are the charges for?” Snape demanded angrily, pulling the warrant from Dumbledore’s hands and reading it. His eyes widened, and then he handed it to Mr. Weasley with a disgusted look. “You’re charging him for illegal Apparition?”

“No, the Department of International Magical Co-operation is charging him for illegal apparition across multiple countries,” Umbridge said coolly. “This is an international issue here, Professor Snape, and I am only here to escort Mr. Charles Weasley to St. Mungo’s and then to a Ministry holding cell, as his Apparition license has already been revoked.”

Mr. Weasley suddenly grabbed a hold of the bedpost and swayed on his feet. His eyes were suddenly wet with uncharacteristic tears.

“Arthur, what’s going on?” Mrs. Weasley asked, pulling the paper from his hands.

“No, he didn’t... he wouldn’t have,” Mr. Weasley said, his voice taking a strangled tone. “No, no, no...”

Umbridge smiled at that second, and Snape felt a rush of repulsion running through his veins that he hadn’t felt since the last time he had looked upon Evan Rosier.

“And, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, you’d honour a warrant signed by your own son, wouldn’t you?”

Ron and Ginny's mouths fell open, as Mrs. Weasley began to sob, throwing her arms around her husband.

"Using Percy to send a message to the Weasleys – and to me – was a very bad idea, Dolores," Dumbledore said, his voice ominous. "Very bad indeed. And as someone who was the former Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, I have the authority to lodge an official complaint."

"And when you can find somebody to listen to you, I'm sure that complaint will be addressed," Umbridge retorted, gesturing for the wizards behind her to come forward. With a wave of their wand, they had conjured a stretcher between them, and with another wave, Charlie was lying on it.

"Take him to the gates," Umbridge ordered.

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS!" Mrs. Weasley screamed, leaping up to fling herself at Umbridge, but Snape grabbed her and her husband before they could attack the toad-like woman.

"If you attack her," Snape snarled, wrestling for a firm hold on Mrs. Weasley's robe, "your son will be worse off! Calm down, woman, or it will be worse for him!"

"Wise words, Snape," Umbridge said with a cold smile. "Perhaps you can be trusted after all."

Don't count on that, Snape thought hatefully, as Umbridge strode out, leaving the horrified Weasleys behind as she took with her their second-eldest son.

"And you're sure she's not a Death Eater?" Ron finally said furiously after a few seconds. "Are you so sure of that now, Hermione?"

"She is not a Death Eater, Ronald," Dumbledore said quietly, "but something just as bad. Fortunately, she will not have won this round entirely. Fred, George, and Nymphadora Tonks will see to that."

“Where are the twins?” Ginny asked. “I couldn’t find them anywhere —”

“Getting Harry.”

* * *

He could see Hogwarts in the distance, the high towers scraping the sky like so many grasping hands reaching for heaven... and yet he was below, and all he could see was hell...

Harry gasped as he jolted awake – only to bang his head rather suddenly against something solid.

He blinked rapidly, looking around, but all he could see was blackness. He could smell something, though – something terrible.

“What the hell...” he whispered, trying to work up enough blood in his mouth to spit...

And then he noticed it.

He tried to flex his fingers, but he couldn’t.

He tried to wiggle his toes, but he couldn’t do that either.

He tried, with rapidly rising panic, to hear his frantically beating heart.

He couldn’t hear a thing.

“Oh my god, this can’t be happening,” Harry said frantically as he looked around the pitch black... area he was in. He looked down, but he couldn’t even see the rest of his body – if indeed, the rest of his body was even there!

“Help!” he shouted. “Somebody, please, help!”

There was a scuffling very close to his head, and he froze. It sounded like somebody was fiddling with some sort of lock...

There was a sudden flash, and Harry blinked back tears as he looked through the sudden window of white light in front of him –

Only to see the smiling face of Nymphadora Tonks.

“God, you look like shit,” Tonks said, cocking an eyebrow. “Sorry, Harry, but I’m not going to be kissing anyone who looks like they had the tar kicked out of them.”

“Tonks, where the hell am I? I can’t feel the rest of my body!” Harry said fearfully. “I don’t know where I am, but I want you to get me the hell out!”

“Is he awake?” an unrecognizable somber voice said from somewhere to Harry’s left. He turned his head to look – horrified that he couldn’t feel anything from the neck downwards – only to see blackness.

“Am I in some sort of box?” he demanded. “Damn it, Tonks, what the hell happened to me?”

Tonks looked a little nervous. “Well, Harry, it’s like this –”

Suddenly, the window in front of Harry was filled with two grinning faces – two identical grinning faces.

“Hello Harry,” George said amicably. “Pleasure to see you. I’d shake your hand, but that’d be a bit difficult at the moment.”

“So, you know that trick that Muggle magicians use where they cut people in half?” Fred asked with a wink. “Well, the Department of Mysteries found a way that they could do that –”

“-Except magically,” George finished with a smile. “Turn the box, Tonks, so he can see his benefactor.”

“What box, I don’t know –” Harry’s voice was cut off by a scraping sound, and a second later, he found himself staring at a sallow-faced

man with a mournful expression, wearing very dark robes and brandishing a very thick wand in one hand and a long metal saw in the other.

Harry felt the blood drain from his face – although into what, exactly, he hadn't a clue. "You... you sawed me in half!"

"Broderick Bode, and a pleasure to make your acquaintance," the wizard said calmly. "And no, not exactly in half. I just took the liberty of separating your various limbs into boxes for transportation."

"And we're going to transport you right back into Hogwarts," George finished with a smile as he slid behind Bode. "Wicked cool magic, don't you think? We'll walk straight through the doors at Honeydukes, and they'll think the boxes are candy shipments. Meanwhile, we can go straight up the secret passageway right into the school!"

"It's ingenious, isn't it?" Fred said, poking his head into Harry's view. "Nobody will see it coming!"

"I think I'd kill you all if I could feel my arms!" Harry said furiously. "How do you know this Bode can be trusted?"

"Because he's under the orders of –"

"Headmaster Dumbledore," Bode finished with a grave nod. "It may be the only way in which you can return to school without being detected, as these boxes are impenetrable to any forms of scrying or detection magic."

Harry swallowed hard. "This... this is just wrong."

"You're telling me," Tonks muttered, "considering I'm going to be the one stuck carrying your torso!"

"And why is that so bad?"

"Where do you think his manhood is attached? We're not leaving it behind!"

* * *

It was a very disheveled and sore Harry that climbed out of the reconnected boxes in the abandoned classroom. Tonks had left Fred and George responsible for putting the boxes back in order, and thankfully, they wouldn't reattach if the body parts weren't in the correct order.

"I would have liked to see his arms growing out of the top of his head," George said wistfully. "Clearly, we need to fiddle with that magic a bit –"

"Then you get in the boxes next time," Harry grumbled, wiping a smear of blood from his face. There had been one benefit of the boxes – they had muffled the pain. Now Harry felt the pain of a fractured jaw and a severely broken nose radiating through his face. "Unless we have to return them to Bode –"

"Which we do," Tonks said heavily, stepping into the room and rubbing her eyes. "Now get out, you two, Harry and I have to talk."

Both twins wolf-whistled, and Harry went red and reached for his wand – only to find it missing.

"Where's my wand? Did somebody get –"

"Relax, Harry, I've got it right here," Tonks said tiredly, tossing Harry his wand and rubbing her eyes again. "It's not going to help you much, though – not now. You want me to fix your nose?"

"Can you cast that charm?" Harry asked nervously as Tonks drew her wand.

"I'm not a Healer, but I'm at least competent," Tonks replied with a snort, pointing her wand at Harry's face. "Episkey."

Harry's face felt quite hot for a few seconds, and Tonks removed her wand with a sigh. "There, that doesn't look half bad. You're still going to have some wicked bruising, though."

"How did you find Bode?" Harry asked quietly. "That must have been a stroke of luck."

"Dumbledore," Tonks replied simply. "He just put his contingency plan into action. Bode was the agent he recruited after Rawling's death, and if anything, that whole box scheme was his idea." She snorted. "Talk about a morbid sense of humor."

"Why does the Department of Mysteries even do that?" Harry asked, shivering at the bizarre feeling of his head being detached from his body. "I mean, it's disturbing as hell!"

Tonks swallowed hard. "Well, one of the things the Department of Mysteries studies is how we are magical – so, being the creepy people they are, they found a way to isolate limbs and test them individually while keeping the body alive. It's disturbing, and if you're not unconscious when it happens, the shock can reportedly damn near kill."

"That's... that's just sick," Harry said with horror. "Who do they even study?"

"Bode wanted to study you, but I convinced him otherwise." Tonks looked green and she took a few shuddering breaths. "Mostly they study victims of the Dementor's Kiss who aren't put out of their misery."

Harry recoiled. "That's terrible!"

"They call it the Department of Mysteries for a reason, Harry, and for good reason," Tonks replied, kicking the wooden box closed. "But really, your situation isn't much better now –"

Harry remembered with a flash. "Sirius! That wasn't him, it couldn't have been!"

“We can’t prove it one way or another, because somehow Voldemort has sealed off Headquarters,” Tonks said with disgust. “Could have easily been a Death Eater, but until we somehow manage to get through the barrier, we won’t be able to verify anything one way or another. And Umbridge decided to arrest Charlie for illegal apparition – which she could have easily overlooked, considering what happened to him!”

Harry felt a wave of hatred surge through him. “And Dumbledore just let it happen? Charlie’s dying!”

“Not anymore he’s not, thankfully,” Tonks replied with a scowl. “Between Pomfrey and Snape, they brought him back from the brink. But that’s not the point now – what we have to deal with is the fact that we are down one school governor. Marchbanks is dead. Dumbledore just got a message from the German embassy – her body was found in pieces.”

Harry forced back the urge to throw up. “Charlie couldn’t have done anything more. From the looks of it –”

“He was facing off against a Death Eater from the First War who knew what the hell he was doing,” Tonks spat. “He didn’t have a chance.”

“Hell, I barely had a chance,” Harry muttered.

“Throwing Stunning Spells and Disarming Charms, you’re not going to,” Tonks said with a shake of her head. “And with Umbridge teaching Defense, you’re not going to learn any spells that can help you.”

“Can you – I mean, you held your own out there.”

“A lot of that magic I learned from Moody – he at least knew what he was doing,” Tonks said with another snort. “But none of that is relevant now – we’re done a potential governor, and even though

Dumbledore's working on getting Cuffe on our side, we're going to need Cassane now."

"And that means the simulamancy," Harry finished with gritted teeth. "And killing somebody."

"Only if we don't get exceedingly lucky," Tonks said with a grimace. She paused. "Wait a second... you're actually okay with it now, Harry?"

"Tonks, look at me. Dmitri Kemester beat the living shit out of me," Harry growled, "and I want to spit in his face when I walk away a free man. And if I have to use simulamancy to beat that son-of-a-bitch, then I'm going to." His eyes blazed with fury. "This time, it's personal."

* * *

It was past midnight by the time Harry and Tonks had finished their work on the simulamancy charms, and he was walking back alone, trying to ignore the pain in his face and wondering if he could find something to bring down the bruises before class –

"I must say, you look terrible, Harry."

Harry nearly jumped as he yanked his wand free. "Damn it, Peeves, get the hell away from me! I've had enough for one day!"

"My sympathies go to you," Peeves said, bowing mockingly, "but I'd really prefer your humble gratitude."

"What gratitude?" Harry spat. "You think I'm grateful for anything you've done?"

"If it wasn't for me, you'd be still chained up in Kemester's cage," Peeves said, wagging a finger. "I got you out – and I got me out too. Hmm, two outs in one day, really quite the record -"

"Peeves, get out of my way, I need my bloody sleep," Harry snapped.

“You don’t want to hear my dirty little secret?” Peeves asked, darting in front of Harry, his eyes wide with glee. “And you won’t want to tell anybody, or you’ll be just another –”

“If you’ve got something to say to me, bloody say it!” Harry snarled.

“You were betrayed.”

Harry froze. “What?”

“Yep, betrayed. Treacherous little fiend went to Kemester and told him your plans,” Peeves said, his eyes dancing as he walked up the wall. “And the funny thing was, you never even saw it coming.”

“And you know who it was?” Harry growled, shock mixing with fury as he walked forward. “Who was it, Peeves? Who betrayed me?”

“You see, that kind of attitude is going to get you nowhere,” Peeves said reprovingly, though his eyes still danced with insane mirth. “Shan’t say nothing if you don’t say please, as I used to say.”

“I’m not falling for that,” Harry snapped, raising his wand.

“Then consider this, Harry,” Peeves said, his voice dropping an octave as the poltergeist moved very close. Harry could almost feel the chill in the air. “Your little departure here left an opening that was ruthlessly exploited, and your little plan may save you, but it won’t save everyone. You see, insanity’s a bit like a sexually transmitted disease – now that’s a term you don’t hear too often at Hogwarts!”

“Just make bloody sense, for once, will you?” Harry exploded, his frustration finally coming up.

“It’s kind of funny, ‘cause those who get around get the most, and although it might just kill you, you’ll have a wild time on the way!” Peeves cackled with glee as he shot up, landing on the ceiling of the hallway. “Oh, and one more thing?”

“Yes?” Harry growled through gritted teeth.

“At last count, there are three Death Eaters at Hogwarts – try to catch ‘em all!”

And with that, Peeves shot through the ceiling, his insane laugh lengthening every shadow where it echoed.

uthor's Note: a surprisingly quick update from me, and as always, read, review, and enjoy!

The note landed on her desk the second Fleur Delacour walked into her cubicle.

“Strange...” she muttered, putting down the stack of folders in her hands and carefully opening the quivering paper airplane – and unlike most of the memos she had received, this one was not purple, but the rather drab colour of ordinary parchment.

But the words scrawled on the parchment were far from ordinary – and nor was the sender.

Her eyes widened with shock as she reread the note. He’s playing a dangerous game, and now he’s drawing me into it... no, it is too dangerous, too costly; he can’t be asking this...

She set the parchment down with a trembling hand and drew her wand. After incinerating it with a wave, Fleur carefully reached for the drawer of her filing cabinet. It rolled open silently on magically greased hinges, and she pulled the official-looking paper out of her desk.

She had an idea about what he was planning – a horrible idea, but one almost ingenious in its simplicity – and it would only take a few documents to trigger it. And like a boulder shoved off the back of a dragon, there would be no way of stopping it.

She swallowed hard as she quickly filled out the form with the easy efficiency that had won her place in the Department of Magical Finance. She knew this was the easy part of the job he had asked her to do – the hard part would be ensuring there was probable cause.

She stared at the tax audit form and clenched her small hand into a fist. Carefully sliding the form into a new silver folder, she rose to her feet and, with a cautious look around, left her cubicle.

It was still early in the morning, and it was unlikely that she would be interrupted, but she could not afford to take chances with something

like this. It was too dangerous – a single misstep could destroy her career and land her in a Ministry holding cell.

She drew her wand, and hesitated. Could she really do this? Did she dare try something like this, all for a young man who she barely knew?

He wouldn't have approached me if he had any other choice, she thought, even as the chill surged down her spine at the thought. But if he's risking this, he's desperate indeed...

She felt the Disillusionment Charm take hold as she grasped the doorknob of the record vault of the Department of Magical Finance – filled with the tax reports and returns of every wizarding business in England.

Including the one she had to alter, and then for which an audit would be surreptitiously 'requested.'

Harry, I hope you know what you're doing... otherwise you're damning us both. But despite herself, she felt a thin grin cross her face. Castellan Zabini, however, will be getting a very rude surprise no matter how this goes.

* * *

“So you're suggesting that there are three Death Eaters in Hogwarts?” Tonks asked sharply, pacing around the room, her short, staccato steps resounding on the stone. “Three of them, here?”

“That's what Peeves told me,” Harry replied darkly, “and although that damned poltergeist could be lying, I somehow doubt it. It's not Peeves' style to lie –”

“It's not the style of a poltergeist to act like this!” Tonks said with frustration. “I remember Peeves, and he never gave cryptic warnings like this – hell, he didn't even act like a rational entity, much less one with hidden intelligence –”

“Not to mention one that’s completely insane,” Harry finished, shaking his head with frustration. “Any idea who he could be referring to?”

“Not a damned clue,” Tonks murmured, sitting down next to Harry. “Snape’s the obvious number one, and even though he’s technically on our side, he is still a Death Eater.”

“And he’s still scum,” Harry added with a grimace. “But what about the other two? Malfoy, or a few of the other older Slytherins?”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Tonks said with a frown. “Voldemort’s smarter than that – they’d be obvious suspects, particularly if he’s responsible in any way for Peeves acting so strangely.”

“But maybe that’s the point,” Harry said, rising to his feet and looking out the window. “Voldemort leaks the information to Peeves, knowing that we’ll suspect the Slytherins as Death Eaters, while slipping another spy in somewhere else.”

“Like where?”

“God, I dunno... maybe through Ravenclaw?”

“The obvious second choice,” Tonks mused, “but of the other houses, it’s the most likely.”

“Unless they slipped someone in through H.A.I.T.,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes.

“Impossible,” Tonks said adamantly, shaking her head. “Umbridge insisted on full background checks before she admitted anybody on the team, and last time I checked, there weren’t any former Death Eaters on that team.”

“And they let Kemester on the team even with the full background check?” Harry asked with rising disgust.

“Well, not exactly,” Tonks said with a grimace as her hair shifted to an angry coppery shade. “Remember the inquiry? Bones effectively gave him the position free and clear after that debacle. I mean, he was proved innocent, in a matter of speaking –”

Harry snorted. “I’m sure. Well, wouldn’t it make sense that he’s the Death Eater, then? I mean, that bastard certainly doesn’t pull any punches.”

“And your face is pulsating proof of that,” Tonks muttered. “But it’s the obvious move for Voldemort. I mean, considering how much Kemester hates you –”

“Not nearly as much as I hate him,” Harry growled.

“- He would be the obvious choice for Voldemort to recruit,” Tonks finished, clenching her own fist. “The problem is, it’s too obvious. Voldemort’s probably hoping that you focus on him rather than spot the true Death Eater.”

“I’m going to focus on him just because I want him to pay,” Harry said furiously. “I’m going to make him wish he was with his brother six feet under!”

“And part of that plan includes getting out of this interrogation free and clear,” Tonks finished grimly, pulling her list of school governors (which was rapidly growing very tattered) out of her bag and spreading it on the table. “You’re sure you trust this Fleur girl?”

“If anybody can do this, it’s Fleur,” Harry said coolly. “I still mostly trust her, and with Sirius... with Sirius out of the picture, I need someone outside I can rely on.”

Tonks cleared her throat.

“Well, besides you.”

“Thank you,” Tonks said with a devious grin. “I’m still surprised we managed to get this cooked up so fast.”

“We only stayed up past two to do it,” Harry muttered, rubbing his eyes. “And I thought blackmail would get easier with more practice...”

“You do know we might not even need the ‘details’ your friend is planting if my suspicions are correct,” Tonks said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Aphrodite Zabini has been reportedly funneling money to the Death Eaters for years, and considering her connections to Lucius Malfoy, I’m actually surprised she hasn’t been apprehended for anything yet.” She snorted. “Then again, all of her husbands have tended to die just before she becomes indicted.”

“Which draws away attention,” Harry added with a grimace. “And that makes Castellan Zabini a target, if we go by any sort of trend. As soon as she sees that he’s in trouble, she’ll think that he’s a security risk – and one to be silenced.”

“This time it’s not her being indicted, though, it’s her husband,” Tonks pointed out. “She might hang around for a bit before trying to knock him off – at least long enough to cover her assets and tracks –”

“Please, she’s not that sentimental,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “We’re going to have to interfere if we want Castellan Zabini still alive by the end of this – and I think it’s about time that we put an end to Aphrodite Zabini’s financial endeavors – for good.”

“And we’ll likely be facing Death Eaters along that way,” Tonks said, blowing out a quick breath and clapping her hands together as she rose to her feet. “Likely Lucius Malfoy – and he’s good at what he does.”

“Ruining peoples’ lives?”

“Well, I was going to say killing people, but he’s good at that too,” Tonks said with a shrug. “Did you get a chance to read through that list of spells that I drew up for you?”

“Yeah, in my spare time,” Harry muttered. “I looked through it while everyone was asleep in History of Magic – and I noticed that there were an awful lot of killing spells on that list.”

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Harry...”

“Honestly, what’s the problem with Avada Kedavra?”

“That assumes you’ll be able to cast it,” Tonks pointed out, cocking an eyebrow, her hair turning bright green as she did – the same green of the Killing Curse. “Moody told you that you need a powerful bit of magic behind the curse, right?”

“Well, Crouch said that, but I can only assume that it was roughly true.”

“You need serious force of will to cast that monster, Harry,” Tonks warned. “This is no Stunning Spell that you can shoot without a thought. The Killing Curse requires you to sincerely want your target dead. And I doubt... well, okay, I know you want Snape and Kemester dead, but how much do you genuinely want to kill Aphrodite Zabini?”

“I can do it,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

“The other curses on that list are just as lethal, but they deal damage to the body, and that’s what we want to try and avoid if we want to use her corpse for simulamancy,” Tonks said briskly. “We want to avoid having to do restorations, and that means taking her as intact as possible.”

“Intact, but dead.”

“Pretty much. The Killing Curse just renders her body non-living without damage. The others here... forced heart attacks, explosive aneurysms, lethal puncturing of lungs and heart via rapidly expanding ribs, all those require a hell of a lot more work to fix.”

Harry frowned. "And you're sure that she'd take over the school governorship if her husband somehow died?"

"I'm not sure, Harry, but we can't afford to take the risk in this case," Tonks replied testily. "And we don't have enough time to do this twice. And besides, we need the body for the simulacrum. Better that we remove an ally to Malfoy and save Castellan Zabini's life than risk the man's death and Aphrodite's seizure of the position. And if we don't get the body –"

"I know, I know, we need if we want to be able to have our hands completely clean when we talk to Cassane," Harry said exasperatedly, running a hand through his hair. "You know, there's got to be another advantage to this magic! I mean, there's got to be more from this magic for all the damn effort that we're putting into it!"

"Other than the ability to possess a body without any hint of detection or chance of identification?" Tonks asked incredulously. "Harry, that's a huge advantage for any sort of operation like this! Complete, unbreakable anonymity is an incredible weapon – why do you think people feared Metamorphmagi so much?"

"But that's different!" Harry argued. "You could take any form you want – I'm just stuck possessing the body of Aphrodite Zabini! I mean, it's not like she's a nonentity in our world!"

Tonks frowned and picked up one of the books tossed on the table. "Hang on a second, Harry, I could have sworn I had spotted something in Metamagical Extrabiology..."

"Good luck finding it," Harry said with a groan. "Frankly, I can't believe you've gotten that far in that book as it is..."

"Found it!" Tonks said with a smile, pointing down at the tiny layer of text. "I knew there was an annotation here somewhere regarding this... basically, it's a discussion of human transfiguration, with regards to live versus dead tissue, with the hypothesis presented that with the proper spells, a Metamorphmagus can more easily cast

human transfiguration spells given one's experience – which is true, really – but when applied to ritualized magic such as this –”

“Short form, Tonks?”

“Basically, during the ritual, I can magically shape the body into the desired shape, using my skills as a Metamorphmagus, a connection created and reinforced by the blood – my blood – required in the ritual. It'll take longer for me to finish the ritual, and it'll be exhausting as hell, but I can do it.”

Harry's eyes widened. “You're kidding? So you can change Aphrodite Zabini's body into anything you want?”

“Within reason, Harry,” Tonks replied. “I can't add or take away any large bodily mass, but I can shape the figure into pretty much whatever we want – providing the exertion doesn't render me unconscious midway through the ritual.”

“And that's likely?” Harry asked apprehensively.

“Damned if I know. I've never done this before.”

“So, in other words, you can shape the body into whatever we need, providing the mass doesn't change all too much,” Harry concluded. “Anything else?”

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Harry, if there is, the wizards who created this sure as hell didn't have time to find it. I mean, there could be unknown benefits, but they were caught before they actually discovered anything conclusive. You're not going to get immunity to the Killing Curse or something just because you possess somebody's body.”

Harry frowned. “I wasn't expecting that. I was just curious...” His voice trailed off as a sudden, unexpected thought burst into his mind. “I've got an idea.”

“Oh Merlin, not this again.”

“Just hear me out, okay? Do you think that if my simulamancy body gets hit with a Killing Curse, I will die or my ‘consciousness’ will just snap back to my original body?”

Tonks frowned before raising her eyebrows. “Honestly, Harry,” she said finally, “I don’t have a damn clue. You can bet that none of our wizards investigated that possibility when they created simulamancy —”

“I’m just thinking that it could be a huge advantage – the advantage I could need – if I run into Death Eaters in that body,” Harry said, his voice quickening with excitement. “Think about it – they could kill that body, but I’d snap back to my original body! It’s the perfect last-ditch plan!”

“Hold on a second, Harry, we can’t jump to conclusions here,” Tonks warned. “Too much is on the line for us to actually test this – namely the fact that if you’re wrong, you’re dead. And would you really want to test that theory on the wrong end of Lucius Malfoy’s wand?”

“You think it’s likely that he’ll interfere if we try and take out Aphrodite Zabini?” Harry asked, a note of nervousness creeping into his voice.

“Count on it,” Tonks said grimly. “And he’s not in Voldemort’s Inner Circle just because he’s rich. He knows a lot of Dark magic – and none of it you want to be on the receiving end of. He’s knows spells that’ll rip your intestines out before you can even raise your wand.”

Harry winced. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“And you wonder why Auror training emphasizes mobility and altering the environment to your advantage?” Tonks said with a heavy sigh. “Sure, we have our share of offensive magic, but you’ve got to realize that often times all it takes is one curse to bring you down – particularly if it’s Dark magic. Why do you think I love using Glisseo so much?”

“Because you like to see people fall on their arses?”

“Well, besides that, it’s a spell that’s got a manageable area of effect, and is ridiculously easy to cast to boot – the perfect spell to handle Dark wizards. Not to mention that it’s a blast at parties.” Tonks winked provocatively. “And during sex.”

Harry went red.

* * *

“You were out late again, weren’t you?” a voice asked quietly as Harry pulled off his Invisibility Cloak and closed the portrait behind him.

Harry nearly stumbled as he scrambled for his wand, but a second later, he recognized the voice, and blew out a shaky breath. “Ron, you nearly scared me half to death! Don’t do that!”

“Sorry,” Ron muttered, coming into the flickering light of the fireplace.

“And why aren’t you in bed, anyways?” Harry asked, irritated. “It’s late, mate. You should be sleeping.”

“I can’t sleep,” Ron said quietly, turning towards the fireplace. “Nobody can, anymore. Sure, everyone goes up to their dormitories, but it’s not like anybody’s getting any actual rest. And besides, after what I saw two days ago... when they took Charlie away...” Ron took a shuddering breath. “I’m not going to sleep with that in my mind.”

Harry swallowed hard. “We’ll get him out of there, Ron, don’t worry. Dumbledore will get him out –”

“I wish I could believe that, but Dumbledore... well, he’s only human, Harry, and with the Ministry the way it is...” Ron slumped in the plush chair by the fire and closed his eyes. “I wish we could do something – anything.”

“Ron, I’d do whatever I could to get Charlie out, but I’ve got too much on my plate as it is,” Harry said uneasily. “Hell, you saw my face when I got back to Hogwarts – I was a bloody mess!”

“Kremaster, I know,” Ron said darkly. “But it’s not just him – Umbridge is cracking down all over the school, and the teachers can only stand up against her for so long. You wouldn’t have seen much of her rants, considering the number of classes you’ve missed of hers –”

“She can’t do a damned thing to the other teachers,” Harry said with a snort. “I’d like to see her try taking McGonagall or Flitwick on – and if she tried fighting Snape, the two would likely kill each other!” And the world would be a better place, he thought to himself with a cold smile.

“Well, she’s going to try – and she’s got H.A.I.T. to do her dirty work. And her detentions, Harry... I’ve heard some rumors, and most of them don’t sound good. Harry, she’s going to start coming after the people who are skipping her classes, and you’re on the top of her list.”

“There are other people skipping her class?” Harry asked, a bit surprised.

“Fred and George, mostly,” Ron said with a shrug. “Most of the others are getting a bit scared of her, and they think that H.A.I.T.’s spying on them too.”

“More true than you’d realize,” Harry muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Harry said hurriedly. “Look, Ron, I don’t know what you want from me here. It’s not like I can get Umbridge thrown out of the school –”

“You’re already doing something by standing up to her,” Ron said, an earnest edge creeping into his voice, “but Harry, even despite everything you’ve been through this summer, there are people who want to be on your side.”

“If this is about Hermione –”

“It’s not, Harry, it’s about me,” Ron said, grim determination filling his voice. “I’m not going to let that she-devil take away my brother and get away with it, and even though I did learn some things when I was helping you prepare for the Triwizard Tournament, it’s not enough. And I really can’t argue with the facts – particularly that you’re one of the strongest wizards in Defense Against the Dark Arts in our year.”

“Ron –”

“And if you gave me the go-ahead, Harry, I fucking swear I’d throw everything I have against Umbridge, and so would a bunch of other people –”

“Ron, listen to me,” Harry said, swallowing hard as he heard the desperation in Ron’s voice. “I need to clear my own name before I can help you here. Believe me, the last thing I want is to see Charlie in prison. In fact...” His voice trailed off as he wildly searched his mind for ideas. “Hell, you don’t need me for any plans here. Try something on your own – it would probably work better than anything I would run. Hell, you took up the fight for Buckbeak two years ago when Hermione couldn’t – surely you can find something for Charlie! And as for Umbridge...”

Ron took a deep breath. “I’ve got a few ideas –”

“Good, then use them,” Harry said quickly. “Don’t get yourself or anyone else expelled, and if you can actually get rid of Umbridge, all the better. Don’t kill her, though – the last thing we need is blood on your hands as well as mine.”

Ron nodded, a small grin spreading across his face. “Thanks, Harry, I appreciate that. And frankly, it’s not like I’ve got much else to do, particularly on nights like this when I can’t sleep...”

Harry grimaced. “You’re not the only one,” he muttered, knowing that the thoughts of the woman he had to kill would prevent him from sleeping that night.

* * *

Castellan Zabini was not typically one to panic.

After all, his job had him shipping large quantities of expensive goods back and forth over the English Channel – a Channel infested with merpeople and Grindylows dying from the pollution and smugglers hungry for an easy profit. Such shipments had to be protected – particularly any under commission from Gringotts, as the goblin bankers were seldom merciful. His job was stressful, but profitable, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

But things had changed only a few months earlier, when his wife had come home from a dinner meeting with Lucius Malfoy, stating that she wanted to move some funds into a private ‘account’ – still tied to his business, but off all the books.

He had been cautious considering that option. It wasn’t like he hadn’t embezzled money before, but it had always been on the side, carefully shielded in overseas accounts. Not like this – not actually in England. It was perilous, particularly with the turmoil in the Ministry at the moment and Fudge’s growing paranoia.

But Aphrodite had reassured him that his yearly audit had already happened, and the account would only be short-term, and that she would more than make up for the ‘inconvenience’.

And she had been right... until that morning.

He was sweating as he reread the very official-looking statement on his wide, oaken desk. He could hardly believe what he was reading –

it was impossible. He had covered his tracks meticulously, utilizing every bit of financial and legal protection he could buy.

How could they have found out? How could they know? I already HAD my full business and tax audit a few months ago – where the hell did this come from?

“Is there a problem, my dear?” a voice said from the door behind his desk. He turned to see Aphrodite Zabini, his beautiful wife of two years. She really was a gorgeous woman, and she looked far younger than her thirty-nine years. Beautiful, striking, with a devious and quick mind to boot, she was a prize he could hardly afford to lose. Even though a few of his friends had advised him against marrying her – after all, she was fifteen years his junior – he had refused to listen, even to the rumors of dead husbands she had left behind her.

“This,” he said, working to keep the edge of fear out of his voice. “It’s a letter, informing me that the business is going to be audited!”

“It’s probably a mistake,” Aphrodite said soothingly, but Castellan knew from the slight brittleness of her voice that she was as suspicious as he was. “You should contact the Department of Magical Finance –”

“And do what? Contact my lawyers? Any sort of action will immediately tip them off that we have something to hide – which we do! I told you this was a bad idea!”

“It’s a favour to Lucius, my dear,” Aphrodite said coolly, crossing her arms over her ample breasts. “And you shouldn’t be worried – the bookkeeping was faultless.”

“Obviously, it wasn’t, Aphrodite, otherwise my company wouldn’t be getting audited right now!” Castellan said furiously, panic and anger warring in his voice. “We’ll have to move quickly if we want to empty that account and redirect the funds –”

“There’s no need to do that,” Aphrodite interrupted impatiently. “We’ve covered the trail –”

“Not well enough, and if I don’t act now, the Hit Wizards will be arresting me for fraud!” Castellán said, his heart pounding as he pulled a scrap of paper from his desk and began scribbling frantically.

“What are you doing?” Aphrodite asked sharply. “You don’t think moving that kind of money will not draw attention?”

“Not if it’s in an overseas account,” Castellán muttered, his pen skating across the paper, “and if I’m lucky, the money will be moved before the audit finds any evidence –”

“The terms of the agreement with Lucius was that the money was to remain here, Castellán,” Aphrodite said coolly. “And you don’t want to break an agreement with Lucius Malfoy, if I’m correct?”

“He’s not the one who’s risking prison by keeping that money!” Castellán replied hurriedly, signing the paper with a shaking hand. “I should never have made this deal, my dear, and I should never have let you convince me to do this. It was too risky, too dangerous!”

Aphrodite’s eyes narrowed for a second before becoming sympathetic, but Castellán had been addressing the envelope, and he did not see the strange look that his wife had given him, as if she reevaluating his usefulness – and was finding him lacking.

* * *

“I swear, Harry, Umbridge is going to kill somebody if you don’t show up to her class soon,” Ron said worriedly as he and Harry sat down at the end of the Gryffindor table. “She was not pleased to see you not there.”

“And when I care about what that ugly bitch thinks, I’ll show up to class, but until then, it would only be a waste of my time,” Harry muttered, his eyes scanning through the list of spells on the page. Tonks had sent him a note warning him that he had to be ready for action. He hadn’t actually had a chance to practice any of the curses or shields on the list – just was well, as he expected many of them to

be rather explosive – but he was confident in his own abilities. And besides, Tonks will be there with me...

He heard a fluttering of wings, and he expectantly looked up to catch the rolled up copy of the Evening Prophet before it landed on his plate. Pulling it open, his eyes landed on the title...

And he froze. Fear, shock, and rage surged through his gut. No, this isn't happening... not now, I thought Dumbledore fixed this, I thought he took care of this...

"What's the problem?" Ron asked, peering at the title page. A second later, he went pale at the title on the page – and the deadly expression on Harry's face.

HOGWARTS IN TURMOIL:

HARRY POTTER, THE PROTECTED CRIMINAL

(PART ONE OF THREE)

By Editor-In-Chief Barnabus Cuffe

The actions of Harry Potter in recent weeks, beginning with his disastrous flight from justice in early August, have created a great disturbance in the wizarding world. Now, shocking new evidence has been collected and released, raising suspicions that the Boy-Who-Lived may have been involved in other, darker crimes against the wizarding community: namely, collaboration with notorious murderer Sirius Black and involvement in the bombing of Ollivander's just a few weeks ago.

"We attempted to apprehend him on the Hogwarts Express, but then Black himself showed up to whisk Potter to safety!" a Hit Wizard (who wished to remain unnamed) told Prophet interviewers last night. "And then Potter somehow got past the cordon at Hogsmeade, where he can take shelter under Dumbledore's security blanket!"

According to ancient rules set down at Hogwarts, a student can only be removed for criminal investigation with the approval of the school governors, and it seems that Potter is taking shelter under this to avoid facing an interrogation under the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. These 'ancient rules', reportedly cited by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore during a meeting with the Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team leader Dolores Umbridge, have come under increased scrutiny and criticism by members of the Wizengamot and the school governors.

"Potter is not being held accountable for his actions, and it is disgraceful that Dumbledore continues to play power games such as this," Felix Nott, a Hogwarts school governor and successful businessman, commented last night from his manor outside of Bristol. "Fortunately, concerned parents now have H.A.I.T. to protect their interests at Hogwarts."

This team, formed on the suggestion of Dolores Umbridge and Amelia Bones not two weeks before school began, was designed to investigate internal issues within Hogwarts, and for the first time, will be responsible for interrogating Potter once terms are decided upon by the school governors in an upcoming vote. The bilateral interrogation team, consisting of Kingsley Shacklebolt (Auror), Dmitri Kemester (Hit Wizard), and Dolores Umbridge will operate under the observation of Hogwarts' representative during Potter's interrogation, Potions Master Severus Snape.

Harry could hardly believe the words on the page in front of him. Dumbledore couldn't be allowing this. "He's letting Snape monitor the interview? And he let them put Kemester on the team? Is he bloody insane?"

"Harry, you might want to keep reading," Ron said hesitantly. "There's more."

Despite his upcoming interrogation, Potter has been given by Dumbledore an unprecedented amount of freedom within Hogwarts – a freedom that has been widely criticized by both H.A.I.T. members

and fellow students, many of which who are concerned about Potter's reckless and questionably dark actions.

“ I told the Daily Prophet last year that Potter can speak Parseltongue, and that he's been friends with werewolves and giants,” fifth year student Draco Malfoy revealed exclusively in a private interview. “I wouldn't be surprised if he was working with Black, and now it looks like it's finally hitting him where it hurts.”

Malfoy is referring to a debacle which only happened two days earlier, in which returning from Hogsmeade under H.A.I.T. escort after interviewing legal counsel, Black attacked Potter before escaping. Even as Black continues to evade pursuit, many are wondering if Potter's connection to the infamous criminal may be used to finally bring him to justice.

“If anything, it seems that Albus Dumbledore, by defending Potter and forcing these extra procedures, is only making matters worse,” Nott commented. “And one can only wonder whose side Dumbledore is really on – or whether he's even still fit to run Hogwarts.”

Recently demoted from Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore has proven to be a difficult figure to reach for commentary, and we all eagerly await his opinion on recent events, particularly the implications made by one Sturgis Podmore on his involvement in the murder of Laertes Rawling. Thus far, Dumbledore has refrained from commenting, as has Potter, despite several inquiries. The H.A.I.T. interrogation team has also refrained from commenting, citing confidentiality regarding their investigation.

One thing is certain, though – with the tragic accidental death of Gertrude Marchbanks, Dumbledore will not be able to interfere on Potter's behalf, as there is an odd number of school governors and thus no requirement for a tie breaker as called for under the rules.

“Like or not, Dumbledore will not be permitted to interfere in school governor affairs,” Nott concluded, “and if he does... well, he will have

overstepped his boundaries one too many times, and his tenure at Hogwarts will be... limited."

More on page 9 with a discussion of Dumbledore's questionable actions, both at Hogwarts and in the political sphere...

Harry couldn't read anymore. An entire article full of lies and deception – that couldn't have been what Dumbledore had wanted...

"I guess Cuffe's not on our side, after all," Harry growled, his hands shaking as he tossed the paper aside, unable to deny the nervous feeling roiling in his gut. "I've got no choice now..."

"No choice for what?" Ron asked.

"It's not important, Ron," Harry whispered, very aware of the stares landing on him as he picked up his fork. Stares of revulsion, anger, fear...

He froze, his eyes narrowing as they focused on one stare that wasn't negatively inclined. It was interested, intrigued, almost hungry...

"Uh, Harry," Ron began slowly, "why is Hannah Abbott staring at you? She looks... okay, that's definitely different..."

Harry's eyes only widened as Hannah slowly rose to her feet and smiled, her typically shy nature betraying something very different about her...

She raised a hand, and with a small, private smile that only Harry seemed to really notice, she beckoned.

Harry rose to his feet and shouldered his bag. Something was up with the Hufflepuff girl, and despite his anger, he was genuinely intrigued. Ignoring Ron's shout, he followed her to the door, his eyes narrowed with the nagging suspicion that something wasn't quite right about her.

* * *

Dumbledore watched Harry and Hannah leave the Great Hall very carefully.

“And it begins,” he whispered, more to himself than anybody.

“Albus, you can’t let this stand,” Professor McGonagall said urgently, her copy of the paper of the paper. “He double-crossed you.”

“I’ve read the article, Minerva,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Roast chicken?”

“And you aren’t concerned?” McGonagall exclaimed. “Dumbledore, he lied to you, took your money, and then printed this... this libel!”

“Don’t worry, Minerva, Barnabus has already gotten what he deserved. I paid him this afternoon,” Dumbledore replied simply. “Beans, Minerva?”

A flush crept in McGonagall’s face, and her hands began trembling. “You paid him?”

“Certainly,” Dumbledore replied with a hint of a grin as he helped himself to pork chops. “After all, I had to get rid of that leprechaun gold eventually.”

* * *

She had tried all day to convince him otherwise, but he had been adamant about coming clean, his panic taking advantage of his reason.

So she had no choice. She had to act, and fast, if she wanted to save everything.

And it’s a damn shame, too, Aphrodite Zabini thought as she knelt carefully by the fireplace, that Blaise is going to lose another step-father.

She tossed the Floo powder into the grate, called out “Malfoy Manor”, and stuck her head into the fire. A few seconds later, she was looking at the relatively gloomy office in the manor, paneled in dark colours and with high-arched windows.

“Lucius, we have to talk.”

* * *

“Look, Hannah, I don’t know why you want me to follow you, but I don’t have unlimited time here,” Harry began as he finally caught up to the Hufflepuff girl and drew his wand. “So what exactly do you want here?”

Hannah didn’t answer, only opening a door that Harry quickly recognized as a broom cupboard. Harry frowned with confusion as he moved closer and looked inside.

“There’s nothing strange in there –”

But before another word could emerge from his mouth, Hannah placed her hand on Harry’s shoulder and smiled.

“Not yet,” she whispered shyly, and before Harry could respond, she leaned up and kissed him - hard.

Rational thought evaporated from Harry’s mind as her lips met his, and he could hardly believe himself as he allowed himself to be guided back into the cupboard, slowly returning Hannah’s kiss...

Her hand sidled up his neck, and Harry felt a chill surge down his spine at her warm touch. His anger was draining away as her other hand was sliding around his waist.

They broke apart, and Harry could hardly believe himself as he gasped for air and looked at Hannah in the dim light peeking through the grimy window. He had never expected this out of the shy, reclusive Hufflepuff girl...something must have happened to her...

His eyes dropped to her breasts, tightly constrained by the blouse she was wearing under her robes, and suddenly he realized that he didn't really care.

He moved to kiss her again –

Only to encounter the sharp tip of a wand jabbing into his chin.

“Now, Harry, come on,” Hannah said with a wry smile as her blond brightened to shade of bubblegum pink. “Honestly, you’ve got to be more careful. Constant vigilance, remember?”

“Tonks!”

“Sweet, shy little Hannah Abbott, nefarious Death Eater, could have easily neutralized you in this position,” Tonks said with a wink, finishing her transformation with a wink. “And the funny thing was, you would have loved the entire thing.”

“Tonks, what the hell are you – what did you do with – you kissed me!”

“What I’m doing is getting you inconspicuously out of the Great Hall, and we’ll have to hurry too,” Tonks said primly, pulling a set of dark robes out of her bag. “The audit report was filed a few hours ago – there was a small notice about it in the Evening Prophet – and we’ve got to get to Castellan Zabini before his wife does, and that means moving tonight. I left Hannah tied up in a remote corner of the Library – don’t worry about it, she’ll work herself free eventually and I disguised myself as my dear cousin Draco while I did it.”

“But you kissed me!”

“Yeah, I do that,” Tonks replied with a smirk. “What was more entertaining was that you were looking for more. You wouldn’t be happening to harbor a secret, private crush on Hannah Abbott, would you?”

“What? I –”

“ Nah, that doesn’t seem quite right,” Tonks continued contemplatively. “You seemed rather enraptured by her breasts, though...”

Harry went scarlet, and he could hardly bring words to his mouth. “Tonks, I swear, you’re –”

“Insufferable? Flirtatious? Drop-dead gorgeous?” Tonks volunteered with a lascivious smile.

“ I was going to say downright infuriating sometimes,” Harry muttered, rubbing his lips, his mind still trying to process the fact that he had actually kissed the Auror – and that she had initiated it!

“Anyways, you’re not a bad kisser, but you do need work,” Tonks finished with another wink. “Maybe I should find – or impersonate – some more girls for you to practice with –”

“Tonks!”

“Yeah, you’re right, we should get going. We’re using the secret passage you showed me to slip out,” Tonks said with a sigh. “Talk about a serious mood-breaker.”

All the dark feelings driven away by the kiss returned with a rush, and Harry scowled. “Yeah, murder’s like that.”

* * *

Most of the lights were dead on the streets around Grimmauld Place, but Severus Snape didn’t care. Better that this was done in darkness, in any case.

He drew his wand, but he didn’t need to cast a spell to feel the magic surround the street. The spells had masterfully been woven together, and Snape knew that it would only take a single move to trigger the

failsafe and turn the entire street into dust – including Order Headquarters, where Sirius Black was likely holed up

So what are you waiting for?

He clenched his uneven teeth as he raised his wand. Thankfully, there were no Muggles even close to the grimy street – none to witness his action to destroy the man he loathed...

He paused for a second. Potter would be furious when he found out that his 'godfather' was likely dead, and Snape knew he was taking a huge risk by acting. The rest of the Order wouldn't likely be happy either, but he had an excuse for them. An accident, easily explained, as I worked to break the shields...

But he knew he didn't need an explanation for them – or to the Dark Lord. They wouldn't find him once he did it. Nobody could find Severus Snape if he didn't want to be found – not even Albus Dumbledore.

All it would take would be a single spell – and Sirius Black would be wiped from existence. The one man who I have no qualms in killing. One of the last links to this bondage tying me down...

"A bondage of your own making, Professor."

Snape spun on his feet and his wand snapped towards the speaker. His dark eyes widened as he saw the figure hovering in the air – a twisted smile on his insane face.

"You shouldn't be here!"

"And yet I am," Peeves whispered, sliding closer to the man. "And doesn't that tell you something?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "It was expected."

"But not something you wanted to see, was it?" Peeves said, sliding around a streetlight with impossible dexterity to meet Snape's eyes

again. "You're right, I really shouldn't be here... but I am, so let's talk, shall we?"

"I have no words for a poltergeist," Snape spat. "So get back to Hogwarts where you belong!"

"You'll never sever all the chains, Snape," Peeves said with a knowing grin, "all while you hold your love sacrosanct –"

Fury rushed through Snape, and his hands began to tremble. "You dare –"

"You know, for such an intelligent man, Snape, you're ridiculously easy to manipulate," Peeves said conversationally. "I know it, the Dark Lord knows it... and so does Dumbledore. He's been using you all along."

"And you don't think I know that?" Snape hissed through clenched teeth. "Why do you think I want nothing more than to get out of this hell?"

Peeves grinned. "But there's all those little things holding you back... like professional obligations, and your crumbling loyalty, and that love for Lily Evans that just won't go away –"

"Shut... up," Snape muttered, his frustration and rage sending another wave of chills down his spine. "I'm working on it... I just want my fucking life back –"

Peeves cackled, his eyes dancing with sadistic glee as he sidled next to Snape.

"But Severus, when did you ever think you had a life of your own to begin with? Trading one master for another... your father, to the Dark Lord, to Dumbledore, and always to Lily –"

He could feel something inside him break, and his wand slashed violently through the air, but Peeves only laughed louder as the

streak of light shot straight through the poltergeist into the window behind him.

“Such a pathetic little man!” Peeves howled with a wild laugh. “You can’t hurt me, Snape! I’m inside of you, the monster you created, instigated, and want to kill! But you can’t, you know! You can’t kill your own soul, no matter how hard some men tried –”

His breaths were coming quickly now, and he turned back to the shield before him. It would only take one spell –

“Yes, go ahead, Snape,” Peeves said gleefully, with another mad laugh. “Blow it to hell and back and Potter will do the same to you! Another step on that road to hell – and this time, there’ll be no going back! That monster you’re trying to kill isn’t there – it’s right here!” With another insane laugh, Peeves soared at the shield – and passed straight through.

The poltergeist turned back and gave the Potions Master an insufferable smirk. “Oh wait, it’s right here now. But you won’t attack me – coward.”

Uncontrollable rage surged through Snape, and his wand snapped up again.

“SECTUMSEMPRA!”

The bolt of light streaked from his wand –

And then everything went white-hot.

* * *

“Right, so I couldn’t really do much reconnaissance, but I know the basic layout of the manor,” Tonks whispered, pulling on a set of brown leather gloves as she crouched behind a massive boulder, Harry right beside her. Both of them had ditched their robes for black

jeans and dark, fitted sweaters. "It shouldn't be hard for us to find Castellan Zabini and keep him out of the line of fire if we're careful.

"That assumes his wife and Malfoy Senior don't attack him first," Harry muttered, shifting uncomfortably. "Can you explain why you made me where this thing? It chafes like hell!"

"And it's also good shielding against Malfoy's Castration Curses," Tonks returned, carefully peering over to the manor about seventy yards away. "Well, at least against one. Plus it conceals the bulge."

"What bulge?"

Tonks smirked. "Oh, you know."

"Whatever," Harry replied tensely, even as his face went red again. "And what else does Malfoy like to use?"

"According to Moody, a lot of nasty transfigurations and a couple very lethal curses. And apparently, he's better defensively than offensively – no Malfoy wants his own skin in any kind of danger. He's a competent duelist, that's for damned sure."

"And what about Aphrodite?" Harry asked, pulling his dark green hood down over his head.

Tonks shrugged helplessly as her hair went matte black and brutally short. "Assume she's competent until we're proven otherwise, and don't let her out of her sight. Remember, she's our target. And make sure to use the Killing Curse if at all possible –"

"I know, I know," Harry said quickly, drawing his wand. "And what about Castellan?"

"If he's not reasonable, Stun him and get him out of the way," Tonks replied warily, drawing her own wand. Muttering a few words, she rapped Harry hard on the head, and a few seconds later, he saw the Disillusionment Charm take hold. "It looks like the coast is relatively

clear – doesn't look like the Zabinis have any guards around their house."

"Just a rock garden," Harry murmured, frowning. "Odd enough, but at least there aren't any crazy plants or something. Any sort of magical traps that you can see?"

"Nothing obvious, if that's what you're talking about," Tonks replied after a few seconds of intent staring at the house and Disillusioning herself. "But be prepared for surprises."

"And how are we getting in?"

"The door will be locked and likely enchanted, so it's out, but windows are easy enough to fix. Use one of the rocks – a spell might set off an alarm."

Suddenly, there was a faint popping sound – as if somebody had Apparated a distance away. Harry turned towards the sound to see a cloaked figure striding up the path to the massive porch and front doors.

"That's likely Malfoy, let's move!"

Slowly, the two began moving towards the manor house, stepping cautiously across the massive rock garden, which Castellan seemed to have put around his domicile instead of grass.

Suddenly, Tonks froze. "Oh, shit."

"What's the problem?"

"Some of these rocks are enchanted."

"How did you know?"

"A few Auror detection spells, and basic intuition."

“Bad enchantments?”

“They always are, Harry – but there are more of them closer to the house.”

“Can you get rid of the enchantments?”

“Not with our timeframe, Malfoy’s already at the door! We’ve got to hurry.”

Swearing under his breath, Harry carefully stepped across the rocks behind Tonks, stepping only where she stepped. Her lack of good balance wasn’t making things easier, and Harry had to grab her twice to prevent her from falling.

There were within eight feet of the house when Tonks stopped short, and Harry could see why. Torches had been lit inside, and they could both see figures moving within...

“We’re out of time, Harry,” she whispered urgently, pointing her wand at one of the rocks. “Wingardium Leviosa.” The rock quickly rose, and to Harry’s shock, began to glow.

“Fuck,” Tonks swore. “Well, here goes nothing. Sepono!”

The rock streaked towards the window...

Suddenly, there was smoke, and bright light, and Harry felt himself stagger as all around him, dozens of boulders exploded into shards of flying rock –

“Now!”

Harry knew what he had to do, and he closed his eyes and charged, bracing his shoulders for the impact as he leapt towards the shattering window...

CRASH.

* * *

Lucius Malfoy's wand was already drawn when the window exploded in, showering the office with glass and broken bits of metal.

"What the –"

But then a figure slammed through the remaining shards, tumbling across the floor behind the desk, a wand already drawn, the blood breaking the obvious Disillusionment Charm.

"You betrayed us!" Aphrodite screamed, pointing her wand at Castellan, who had been forced against the bookcase only moments before and who was already moving behind a nearby table. "Confringo!"

The blast erupted from her wand, but Castellan managed to avoid the worst of the blast. The table exploded, hurling shards of broken wood across the room, but even as Lucius threw up a quick Shield Charm, he saw another figure dive through the now destroyed window, moving far more smoothly than the first behind the desk –

"I didn't betray you – you betrayed me!" Castellan shouted. "Stupe-"

"NO!"

But it was too late for the impotent Zabini, for Malfoy had already swung his wand around, and Castellan Zabini had made himself visible – a grave mistake.

"Somes effrego!"

"PARIETIS!"

Malfoy only had a second to dive for cover as the orange bolt bounced off the conjured invisible wall, striking the bookcase on the side of the room and shattering it into pieces. It quivered on the wall before toppling with a brutal crash, sending papers flying everywhere –

Malfoy did not recognize the new intruders, but he did recognize the spell. It was a force shield, a cheap, brutally efficient shielding spell – and it was Auror level.

And this can only mean one thing - the Order's here!

* * *

Harry shielded his eyes as papers flew through the room, but he didn't dare move from out of the desk's cover. Tonks' last minute shield might have saved Castellán for now, but the man didn't seem to have the sense to take cover –

“We need to get away from the desk!” Tonks shouted above the din. “Get Castellán, I'll take Malfoy!”

Harry clenched his fist, and dove towards Castellán. The man's eyes widened with surprise as Harry grabbed him and threw him hard against the wall – even as Aphrodite fired another Blasting Curse, blowing Castellán's credenza to shivering shards and dust.

“Who are you?” the older man stammered as Harry shoved him down away from the flash of another curse.

“Harry Potter, and I'm saving your life!” Harry shouted, pulling both of them behind one of the few stone pillars in the room, and narrowly avoiding a flicker of blue light that burned the air and blew out another window from behind them. He could feel hot glass peppering the back of his sweater –

“Lucius, we have to leave before more show up!” Aphrodite screamed, just barely dodging another falling bookcase knocked off the wall by one of Tonks' deflected curses.

BANG.

“ATRUM CHAIN –”

“CLARUS LEVITAS!”

Harry could only watch as blue-white bolts of lightning erupted from Lucius’ wand – only to meet purplish bolts erupting from Tonks’...

“Incendio!”

Harry’s eyes widened as the red-hot spell streaked from Aphrodite’s wand – and hit the heavy oaken desk from where Tonks was hiding. Her eyes widened as she tried to scramble away from the fire, but the bolts from her wand flickered –

BOOM.

The thunderclap shook the room, and Harry could only shield his eyes and Castellan behind the pillar as blue bolts slammed into the flaming desk – and blew it clean through the massive windows behind it. For a second, all Harry could hear was glass breaking and thunder ringing in his ears....

“Harry, they’re getting away! GO!”

Harry didn’t know how Tonks could scream, let alone scramble to her feet, in the scalding air – superheated by all the papers catching fire across the room – but he knew he didn’t have a choice. Raising his wand, he concentrated with all his might.

“FLAMMA LACERO!”

A red-hot streak of flame erupted out of Harry’s wand and streaked towards Lucius, but just like with Sirius, it winked out with a single deft wave of the Death Eater’s wand.

But Lucius’ eyes widened with recognition, for he had heard the name – and in the hot light of the room, he could see the scar.

* * *

It was impossible. How could Potter – Harry fucking Potter – be there? It was unbelievable, impossible...

And a golden opportunity...

He knew he had little time before the Trace on Harry Potter alerted the Hit Wizards – hell, he only had minutes – but he could call more Death Eaters. Reinforcements...

“We have to go!” Aphrodite screamed, grabbing Malfoy’s arm. “NOW! Just kill him and let’s go!”

But Lucius Malfoy had other orders regarding Harry Potter – orders from the Dark Lord himself.... And as much as he loathed them, he didn’t dare cross the Dark Lord.

He grabbed Aphrodite by the shoulder and wrenched her through the door. Like it or not, she had to stay alive. He turned back, and slashed his wand at the floor.

“OBEX EFFREGO!”

He heard a deep, shuddering crack, and he felt the house tremble beneath his feet. Despite himself, a grim smile crossed his face. Perfect.

* * *

Harry felt the increasing shudder from Malfoy’s spell, and he swore. He didn’t know what Malfoy had cast, but whatever it was, it seemed to be causing the floor of the room to shake itself apart!

“He’s trying to bring down the house!” Tonks screamed, even as a fissure began opening of the tile floor between them and the door. “I’ll get Castellan out of here, get Aphrodite before she Disapparates!”

The pillar Harry was standing behind cracked ominously and Harry knew he was out of time. Taking a deep breath, he began to run towards the widening fissure ripping the office apart –

His leap carried him over the crack, but he landed badly, scrambling up as fast as he could – only to throw himself aside from a bolt of red-hot light erupting from Lucius' wand.

“Potter himself,” Malfoy spat, shoving Aphrodite behind him as he raised his wand. “The Dark Lord may have forbidden me from killing you, but there are worse things than death after all. Venter extorqueo!”

Harry dove away from the massive bolt of sickly grayish light and pointed his wand at Malfoy. “Glisseo!”

A downward slash of the Death Eater's wand sent the curse careening into the floor between them, and Harry swore under his breath. In one move, Malfoy had blocked Harry's passage down the corridor while protecting his escape route –

“Mens fragor!”

Harry could only watch with shock as a massive blue globe erupted out of Lucius' wand and sped down the hallway, growing larger and larger, blocking any maneuver Harry might make to dodge...

So he did the only thing he could think of. Falling flat on his stomach, he threw himself forward, and slid.

He felt the curse scream over his head and collide with the door, but Harry wasn't paying attention, as he struggled to get himself to a position to curse Malfoy –

CRUNCH.

He bit his tongue as the pain surged through his left wrist and elbow, shattered as he had thrown his arm to block the tapestry torn from the wall that had suddenly gained the stopping power of a brick wall. Swearing again, Harry struggled to pull himself around the tapestry...

Only to see Lucius standing on the other side, an icy smile on his face.

“Crucio!”

CRACK.

“Glisseo!”

Malfoy’s curse went wide as his feet slid out from underneath him. Aphrodite screamed as she stumbled and seized a hold of a doorknob to keep herself steady, but Tonks’ Apparition into the fight had taken them all by surprise. Suddenly, Harry felt traction, and he struggled to his feet –

“Aphrodite, Disapparate!” Malfoy roared, shoving himself away on the frictionless floor in a remarkably undignified way as he wrenched his wand towards Tonks. “Cruor vomica!”

The Auror threw herself to the side, but the curse only nearly missed the side of her face. But Aphrodite was already spinning on her heel –

BANG.

The Zabini woman staggered as if she had been hit with a saucepan, and Lucius howled with fury. From the looks on their faces, and the grim smirk on Tonks’, Harry guessed the Anti-Apparition jinxes, somehow dropped by Tonks, had been restored.

But Aphrodite was already moving. Wrenching open the door, she hurled herself inside, only barely missing the curse erupting from Tonks’ wand that nearly reduced the door to kindling.

But Tonks had taken her attention off of Malfoy for too long, and he was already raising his wand –

“Avada –”

“FLAMMA LACERO!” Harry roared, wildly slashing his wand.

This time, the wave of fire struck true, and the Death Eater could only howl and convulse with pain as the flame tore between his legs and up towards his heart –

“Don’t worry about him, get her!” Tonks yelled, her next curse blowing the door clean off the hinges. Swearing under his breath, Harry finally scrambled to his feet and charged into the room.

This room, however, was no office – it was a bedroom, and Harry could only duck at the last second as something extremely hot and fast sliced across his cheek...

He heard a muffled curse from behind him, and he chanced a look. Tonks was swearing, and trying to rip the flaming bolt out of her thigh – the same bolt that barely missed Harry.

“Quaero telum!”

Harry dove as another white hot bolt shot from Aphrodite’s wand, but he rose to his feet almost immediately. Rage and hatred as hot as the bullet surged through him, and he raised his wand, mustering every ounce of concentration he could bring...

His eyes met Aphrodite’s hateful, horrified, remorseless gaze, and he felt the last vestige of his remorse die without a scream.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Time seemed to stop as green light exploded from his wand.

He heard not the rushing sound, but the long, drawn-out scream of a soul torn away...

The sound stopped, the light faded, and Aphrodite Zabini collapsed, dead, to the floor.

* * *

Castellan was sweating as he looked at the two grim faces in front of him. His night had been a living hell, and his home was a mess, but neither truth gave him quite so much terror as what he was seeing now.

“She... she’s dead?”

“Yes,” Harry Potter said coldly. “She’s dead.”

“We saved your life from your wife and Lucius Malfoy,” the other figure said, one Castellan couldn’t recognize, with very short black hair and thin features. “And now you owe us.”

“Can you protect me?” Castellan asked frantically. “Malfoy escaped!”

“Not with everything he came here with,” Harry said with a hint of a dark smile, “but that’s not the point. He won’t be back here again. What is important is that your support. You owe me, Castellan Zabini.”

“But... but the Aurors and the Hit Wizards will be coming to investigate this!” Castellan exclaimed. “What am I supposed to say!”

“A magical experiment gone awry,” the short-haired girl said curtly. “Nobody will know the difference – and Malfoy doesn’t dare talk or he risks identifying his own role in this mess. You’ll come out of this intact, don’t worry.”

“Not if this audit ruins me!” Castellan blurted, his eyes wide with fear. He suddenly froze – he should not have said that.

“So you were embezzling money,” the short-haired girl said, cocking an eyebrow.

“We didn’t even need the planted evidence,” Harry muttered. “She’ll have to get rid of that –”

“Get rid of what? What’s going on? Did you –”

Harry’s hand clamped onto Castellan’s shoulder, and he looked the older man dead in the eye. “Listen to me, Zabini, you’ve got one choice, one very profitable for you if you choose rightly. Support the counter-measure with the school governors, and that tax audit will disappear. You’ll have time to cover your tracks, and nobody will breathe a word about what happened here tonight.”

Castellan swallowed hard. “T-that shouldn’t be much of a problem –”

“I’m not finished,” Harry cut him off sharply. “You’re to keep your finances clean – Voldemort’s not getting any more money from the Zabinis, and you make sure that your wife’s life insurance policy doesn’t donate her fortune to anyone besides you.”

“I... I can handle that, I guess, but what –”

“And we’re taking your wife’s body.”

Castellan could hardly form words. “W-what? Why?”

“We’re just cleaning up,” the short-haired figure said curtly. “But that condition is non-negotiable. Do we have a deal?”

“I can’t even bury her? I mean, she only made a horrible mistake –”

“Do we have a deal?” Harry growled, his grip getting tighter.

“Yes! Okay, I’ll do it! J-just don’t hurt me, please!” Castellan pleaded.

The short-haired girl raised her wand, and with a muttered word, levitated Aphrodite Zabini’s body into the air like a grotesque puppet on invisible strings.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Harry said calmly, rising to his feet, and without another word, he stepped through the broken window into the darkness, where Castellan could already hear the dim sound of approaching thunder.

He still wasn't sure if it was a liquid or a gas, or even how he could pull the memories from his head with just a tap of his wand, but the Pensieve was getting fuller every day.

Everything that could be used against him, that the interrogation team could ask him... he pulled it all out, leaving only a shadow of the memory left in his mind – enough that he could remember the basics, but not the details. Hopefully it would be enough...

He felt the last strand of memory fall from his head, and he lightly batted it down with his wand, towards the small basin Dumbledore had given him. It slid into the substance like oil, and for a second, he could see the flicker of green light...

Harry closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. He had expected these feelings, Tonks had warned him they would come. But curiously, they felt... muted. Almost as if he wasn't the one who had cast the spell...

And he wasn't sure he regretted it either.

Opening his bedside drawer, he shoved the basin inside and closed it quickly. Even though there was nobody else in the dormitory besides him – by now, he was considering Umbridge's class a free period – he was still wary. He didn't want them finding out about his Pensieve like he found out about Dumbledore's. And since nobody seems to be sleeping anymore, I can't use it at night –

It broke the silence abruptly, and Harry swore under his breath as he got to his feet, having nearly fallen off the bed in panic.

"Harry, something wrong?" Ron asked curiously, but there was a forced lightness in his voice that immediately made Harry suspicious.

"Nothing, nothing," Harry said, running a hand through his hair as he tried to slow his heartbeat. "Just... you startled me."

“Huh,” Ron replied, wincing slightly as he awkwardly shoved the door shut with his shoulder. Harry frowned – it seemed like his friend was avoiding the usage of his right hand...

“Ron, you’re bleeding!”

Ron closed his eyes. “Yeah,” he muttered, tossing his bags on his bed. “Got to clean that up...”

“Why are you bleeding?”

“Umbridge.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot into his hair – it had been a long time since he had heard such raw hatred in Ron’s voice. “What did she –”

“Take a look at my hand, Harry,” Ron said through gritted teeth, shoving his arm out.

Harry stepped forward and swallowed hard at the bloody marks on the back of Ron’s hand. It looked as if somebody careless with a knife had been scribbling all over Ron’s hand... but there were words there...

“I can’t read it,” Harry said slowly. “What... what does it –”

“No surprise you can’t read it, it’s my writing,” Ron muttered, closing his eyes tightly as he wiped the excess blood away from the cuts. “Take a look now.”

Harry looked closer – and froze, a sick feeling welling up in his stomach.

Written for Harry Potter

“It’s her new strategy,” Ron whispered, grabbing Harry’s sleeve. “Until you start coming to class, she’s going to make us all write this. Every class, the entire class. She’s got these quills... they make us

write in our own blood, Harry! It's sick... and she said she's doing this for every Gryffindor class that comes into her room!"

"That's wrong!" Harry exclaimed. "She can't do this – McGonagall will kill her!"

"I don't think Umbridge gives a damn, Harry – she wants you under her leash, and she'll attack us to do it!" Ron swallowed hard. "Look, I know you've been doing something secret while you're skiving away her classes, but you'll have the entire Tower up in arms if you don't get to her class!"

Harry clenched both his fists. "Ron, I don't have a lot of choices –"

"Harry, please," Ron gasped, his hand shaking. "It was hell in there, Harry. The girls were crying, everyone was bleeding, and Umbridge just had this sick smile on her face the entire damn time! I'm asking you as a friend, Harry – if you want any of them to trust or believe you when this is all over, you won't get it by leaving us high and dry!"

Harry was shaking now – but not with pain. He turned towards the door and began walking towards it, his entire body trembling with rage.

"What – where are you going, Harry?"

"Dinner," Harry replied tightly. "Dumbledore and I need to have a talk."

* * *

"Damn it, Kingsley, you're going to compromise my cover –"

"Remus, we don't have time for this," Kingsley growled, grabbing the werewolf by the collar and dragging him into a different shadow. After all, Knockturn Alley was seldom known by its light, but for its darkness.

“What’s so goddamn urgent that you need to pull me out of a mission –”

“New priorities,” Kingsley replied, his voice unnaturally biting as he wrinkled his nose. “God, Remus, you smell.”

Remus looked down at his filthy robes, caked with grime and heavily patched. A rush of shame and frustration surged through him. “I need to blend with the crowd if I’m to run with them. And I’m close to getting in – Voldemort’s been neglecting the werewolves in his plans, and if I hurry, I can get to them before Fenrir Greyback does –”

“The reason Voldemort’s been neglecting those plans is because he’s got other ones,” Kingsley said grimly, the darkness making his features difficult to read. “Bigger ones. But that’s not why Dumbledore needs you, and I only have a bit of time as it is...”

“Did something go wrong?”

“That would be understating it,” Kingsley whispered quickly – unusual for the Auror. “It’s been a nightmare the past few days. The leak in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been feeding information to Voldemort – and he has a rough idea where Headquarters is. He sealed it off with some sort of foreign magic that even Dumbledore’s finding difficult to outthink. And on the same day, Potter, Tonks, and Charlie Weasley were attacked on the road back from Hogwarts – by Sirius Black and two Death Eaters.”

All the blood drained from Remus’ face. “No, Sirius wouldn’t –”

“Not Potter, he wouldn’t, unless Voldemort did something to him,” Kingsley said tensely. “But that’s not the point – Kemester got Potter, and from Tonks’ report, beat him unconscious in an interrogation room.”

Remus’ breath hitched in his throat. “The Ministry... they have Harry?”

“Not anymore, but that’s hardly the concern. What is worrying Dumbledore right now is what Potter’s done already. Remus, there was an attack on Castellan Zabini’s house last night – and Aphrodite Zabini is gone. Castellan won’t say where, but given her connections to Malfoy, it can’t be good.”

“You think... you think Harry could –”

“At this point, Dumbledore doesn’t know what Potter will do, and that’s what scares all of us,” Kingsley muttered with frustration. “Dumbledore’s promise not to interfere in Potter’s affairs is going to bite him in the ass, and if Potter goes down, we’re all in trouble. But all the Ministry knows is that their Trace monitors went haywire last night with under-age magic, and the Aurors are trying to figure out the truth – and many of them are already suspecting Potter.”

“So... so you want me to do what?’ Remus asked. “I, I can’t exactly do anything to stop Harry anymore and I doubt I could protect him...”

“I know that, Remus, and so does Dumbledore,” Kingsley said grimly. “And like it or not, even though I’m on H.A.I.T., I can’t do a damn thing to stop Potter without jeopardizing my position on the interrogation team, and with Umbridge, it’s a bloody miracle I got the spot in the first place –”

“Kingsley, thank you for the update, but I don’t have the time for this either,” Remus said tensely. “What does Dumbledore want me to do?”

“He wants you to find Severus Snape.”

* * *

“Professor, we can’t just sit back and watch this happen!” Harry said anxiously. “Umbridge is bloody insane! Surely, this is against some sort of school rule somewhere –”

Dumbledore closed his eyes as he began to pace around the small room. Harry had managed to interrupt Dumbledore during pudding, and he knew he only had a limited window of time.

“And the parents, they wouldn’t stand for this –”

“I’m sure there probably is some rule against this, Harry, but at this point, any attempt to stop Dolores Umbridge would be disastrous for us.”

Harry could hardly believe what he was saying. “But sir, we can’t just let this happen!”

“If I told Umbridge to stop, she would only bring the greater weight of the Ministry to Hogwarts, and my position would be seized,” Dumbledore said quietly, continuing to pace, the firelight casting flickering shadows across the portraits. “It is too soon, Harry – I fully expect to be removed from Hogwarts at some point this year, but it is too soon – there are things that must be done. And I cannot get the teachers to interfere – the last thing we need is to lose our allies here – and given this uncertain time, it would be difficult indeed to find competent replacements.”

“But, the parents, surely they could do something –”

“And how are they to discover the truth, through Umbridge’s filter over the communications of this school?”

Harry could only gape. “You – you knew. You couldn’t stop them?”

“I tried, Harry, but in the wake of Laertes Rawling’s death, my voice only brings suspicion and mistrust in the Ministry.” Dumbledore stopped and turned towards Harry. “However, as we both now know, you may succeed where I cannot.”

“But how can I...” Harry’s voice trailed off at the knowing look on Dumbledore’s face. He felt a chill surge down his back – it was almost like Dumbledore knew what Harry had been doing... and he was not stopping him.

“Listen carefully, Harry,” Dumbledore began, stepping closer to him and placing a heavily veined hand upon Harry’s shoulder. “Even if I do not know all the facts, I can appreciate your efforts. And I also know the last man you must convince will be the most difficult. Nathan Cassane is unlike anyone you have ever met, and likely will meet in your life.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably under Dumbledore’s grip, a leaden feeling filling up his stomach. “Did you know him before he —”

“He and I have been acquainted with each other over our lives,” Dumbledore replied steadily. “Harry, he lost a great deal during the First War, and his methods of coping with that loss have been... questionable. Your key, Harry, if you indeed find some way to speak to him, will be convincing him to care.”

“ Why wouldn’t he care? I mean, isn’t this part of his responsibilities?” Very real anger began creeping into Harry’s voice. “Isn’t he supposed to care?”

“He’s capricious by nature, Harry,” Dumbledore said intently, “and his power only emphasizes that trait. If you can convince him to care, on the other hand... you will have made an ally of one of the most powerful wizards in the world.” Dumbledore let go of Harry’s shoulder and moved back towards the fire. “And even though Voldemort did not fear him, he considered Nathan Cassane a threat to be managed.”

“So he was on our side?”

“By the year of Voldemort’s fall, Nathan was on nobody’s side, except his own.” Dumbledore seemed almost regretful as he looked into the fire. “It was an arrangement that was safest for us all.”

“Well, is it even worth my time to go after him?” Harry asked, frustration leaking into his voice.

“Yes,” Dumbledore replied immediately, looking away from the fire to Harry. “It is.”

“And what about Umbridge?”

A small grin slid onto the old Headmaster’s face. “I think that if you manage to win over the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Professor Dolores Umbridge will have a much bigger issue on her hands.”

* * *

The unused classroom was dimmed – lit only by a few flickering candles – when Harry walked in. Closing the door with a trembling hand, he locked it with a wave of his wand.

“You found everything okay?” Tonks asked quietly, leaning over the five books opened across the table. She raised her wand and flicked it at the second table in the room. This one was made of stone, and a figure covered by a thin white sheet was laying on it. At the flick of Tonks’ wand, the figure briefly glowed orange before fading, earning a brisk nod from the Auror.

“Yeah,” Harry replied, setting his bag back behind Tonks’ desk. “Nice illusion blocking the door. Diagnostic spells almost done?”

“Nearly,” Tonks muttered. With a murmured word that definitely did not sound like any spell Harry had heard before, she sketched a symbol in the air. The symbol floated over the body, and Tonks took a deep breath. When the symbol turned green, Tonks let a small grin cross her face as she removed it from the air with a wave.

“What was that one?”

“Ensuring that that body is capable of using magic,” Tonks replied, sketching another symbol in the air, this one all jagged lines that reminded Harry strongly of Hermione’s runes. “And this one is to ensure the brain is capable of receiving your consciousness.”

The symbols blinked three times before disappearing, and Tonks scribbled down a few calculations, her hair shifting colour madly as she did.

“Is it... going well?” Harry asked hesitantly, eyeing the five books spread in a pentagonal shape on the table. Text was glowing a feral red on four of the exposed pages – except for the fifth book, where the light was spilling from the sheet itself, and was a sodden off-white.

“As well as can be expected,” Tonks replied with a shrug, pointing her wand at one of the books – from the rustling blades around the covers, Harry guessed it was Blood and Astral Projection: A Thesis. With a muttered word, the glowing text flickered twice, and Tonks nodded with satisfaction. Reaching beneath the table, she pulled a short curved knife from her bag and a very narrow flask.

“So... can we do this tonight?” Harry asked.

Tonks took a deep breath as she waved her wand again. The few candles still lit in the room broke free of their mounts, spinning wildly in the air before they came to rest around the bier – uncomfortably close to the white sheet for Harry’s reckoning.

“I think we can make this work,” Tonks said, breathing heavily. “Now listen, this will be hard enough, considering I don’t totally understand the theory behind this sort of magic. You can only get so far without being a bloody magical theoretician, and I’m not one of those. This is going to be risky, Harry, and I don’t even want to think about what could happen if one of us made a mistake.”

“I got the potions that you wanted –”

“All fine and good, Harry, and I already used them to prepare the ritual and allow me to use the final diagnostic spells, but we can’t cut corners with this,” Tonks replied tersely, tapping the page of Metamagic Extrabiology: An Examination a bit harder than Harry guessed was necessary. The entire page went a poisonous, acid green, and Tonks swore under her breath. She tapped the page

again, and the glow faded to just over a few lines of text, but Tonks still regarded the page warily.

“Did you, ah, get the blood –”

“Got some of it, but not enough yet,” Tonks replied, gesturing to a beaker lying on the edge of the table. Harry winced as he saw the thin red crust lining the lip of the glass. “Enough to change the body into the form that’ll work best for our purposes - but I am going to need more.”

“Are you up to it?” Harry asked slowly, noticing the heavy circles under her eyes. “None of us are at our best when we’re tired –”

“We’re nearly through this, Harry, and I want to see it over with,” Tonks murmured, with a subtle skyward twirl of the wand. Before Harry’s amazed eyes, the glowing words seemed to peel themselves off of the pages, growing and spinning as they fluttered towards the stone table. With a sudden hiss, the words burned themselves into the stone, leaving the letters and runes starkly glowing on the dark rock.

Tonks let out another breath. “Okay, that should be it for this part. Harry, grab the table on the edge of the room and pull it next to the bier – hold on, never mind, I’ll help you move it...”

“Much appreciated,” Harry grunted, lifting the heavy desk. Gingerly stepping over the dozens of lines traced upon the floor, Harry set the table down in the central circle of the room, traced in cold, dull lead – and roughly at that.

“Isn’t that circle supposed to be... I dunno, not as rough?” Harry asked worriedly as he stepped away from the table and back towards Tonks’ desk, where all five books were glowing now. The book at the top of the pentagon was still emitting the same weak sodden light, as if a fluorescent light had been covered in dusty rags.

“Who’s the expert here, you or me?” Tonks asked wryly, slowly walking back behind her desk and nearly tripping on Harry’s bag.

“Neither of us and that’s why I’m asking,” Harry replied nervously as Tonks raised her wand again. More glowing words flew out of the books, and there was a frantic flapping as the pages began to turn. These words burned themselves into the wooden table, and for a second Harry thought the old desk was going to catch fire – until the dull wooden brown turned the leaden grey of granite, and the words still glowed brightly in the dimming room.

“You only draw a perfect circle for rituals like this if you want the magical effect inside to be permanent,” Tonks said, blowing out a quick breath as she took a drink from the glass of what looked like water on her desk. “Broken circle equals temporary effects, while a rough one destabilizes the magic to fit the commands of the spell. Perfect circles are very stable magically.”

“You sound far too certain about that for it to have any truth.”

Tonks winced. “Yeah, I sort of had to make that leap of faith. The theory behind it is sound, at least. Face it, Harry, this is all theory that we’re working with, because none of the lab notes that I found correspond with the successful experiment – only the failed ones. I can only work with the knowledge of their mistakes –”

“So you’re saying that I could be stepping into an unstable magical effect that we’re creating based upon theory only?” Harry asked, swallowing hard. “Tonks, I hope to Merlin you know what the hell you’re doing, because this is starting to scare me...”

Tonks did smile at that, but Harry saw the worry behind her gaze. Reaching below the table, she pulled a rather sheer silvery sheet from a small box and tossed it to Harry.

“Here you go. Now strip.”

“What?”

Tonks sighed with exasperation. "Clothing only gets in the way, Harry, particularly with this kind of magic." She winked. "Besides, I've always wanted to see the Boy-Who-Lived naked."

Harry put his hand to his face to cover his rising embarrassment. "Please tell me we don't have to go through this whole mess every time I possess the... uh, what do I call the body?"

Tonks raised her eyebrows as her hair settled on a peculiar off-white colour. "Well, the notes call it a 'simulacrum', so we'll go with that. And no – once you establish a stable connection, you'll be able to 'hop' between bodies with a relative minimum of fuss. Of course, distance makes things exponentially more difficult, but we'll deal with that when the time comes."

Giving Tonks a suspicious glare, Harry began to shrug off his robes. In a few minutes, he was wearing nothing but his boxers and the sheet wrapped around him.

"And here I thought Quidditch gave one muscles," Tonks said under her breath. "Come on, ditch the boxers, Harry."

"You'll be able to see right through the sheet!"

"I might just be counting on that," Tonks shot back with a devilish smile. "Now come on, Harry, we don't have all night."

Harry glared at Tonks, but she only laughed. So, awkwardly holding the sheet around him, he pulled down his boxers and tossed them with the rest of his clothes.

"What now?"

"Now we proceed to have kinky sex on top of the desk, which I will transfigure into a bed for good measure," Tonks replied primly, keeping a completely straight face. "Turns out the whole simulamancy thing was a very well conceived plan just to get you in bed with me."

“Tonks!”

“Of course, I’m kidding,” Tonks continued with a wink. “Nah, just get up onto the table and lie flat on your back. Keep all parts of your body as still as possible – and that includes your –”

“I get it,” Harry said quickly, his face already bright red – although he doubted Tonks would be able to tell, the candles already having burnt low. Practically the only light left in the room were the words, flickering their neon colours as he warily sat on the bed, struggling to keep the silvery sheet wrapped around him.

“Lie down,” Tonks murmured, tapping the top book on the desk, causing a cascade of brilliant white light to dance across the ceiling, “and pull the sheet over your head. Try and relax as much as you can, and think only of what you read in Consciousness Conjunctions. My blood will form part of the link from the simulacrum, but you need to form the other half to bridge the gap. Are you ready?”

Harry shifted on the cold stone as he carefully pulled the sheet over his eyes. He blinked a few times in awe – it seemed that every light, every feature in the room, was lined with silvery stars, dancing across the ceiling...

“I only have one diagnostic spell to use on you, first, before we activate the magic,” Tonks said, her voice seeming to echo, as if in a high-ceilinged cathedral. “Just to check to see if you’re compatible with the magic, then I’m immediately going to activate the simulamancy magic. Are you ready, Harry?”

Harry took a deep breath, preparing himself for whatever would come ahead. He didn’t know if it was going to hurt or not, but the cold stone beneath his back was starting to get uncomfortable.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

He heard Tonks began to chant, her voice melodic. Suddenly, the ceiling flickered, and beneath the sheet, Harry could see circles... vast circles of silver, traced up the walls and across the ceiling,

weaving through the air like so many threads caught in the wind. Highlights of red and green and blue traced themselves around the room, crawling around the threads like fish following the line, like shooting stars riding the comets...

He heard an echoing bang, and walls of silver erupted in Harry's vision, as the magic took its hold...

He was standing in a darkened room, the bloodstains climbing up the walls instead of down as he saw them all – naked, bleeding, dying...

"This... this was no work of man," he heard the grim tone of Albus Dumbledore echo. He turned to see the old man, his eyes blazing with cold clear fury. "And even you, Harry, cannot command this power yet."

"What is it?" Harry whispered, his voice echoing peculiarly in the room.

"Something that never should have happened... a door that never should have been opened..."

A whirl of dark colours, and he was standing on top of the Astronomy Tower, sheets of rain and snow pummeling the balcony. The girl looked like nothing more than a drowned ghost, her warm tears mingling with the cool rain.

"No... please," he heard himself whisper, stepping out as the winds cut his robes like so many icy, slick, tentacles.

Luna shook her head. "We're both too far to come out, Isabelle. You know that as well as I."

"Please..."

"Don't feel bad, Harry, it's not the end... the boundaries are down, so I merely... cross over..."

She turned, and her foot purposefully slipped upon the battlement...

Harry opened his mouth to shout, but no sound emerged from his mouth. He was standing alone, looking down upon an inferno from a slick black outcropping. Again, rain pounded the outcropping, pressing his hood tight to his face...

He took a deep breath, drew his wand, and before he could utter another word, dove off the cliff.

Falling...falling forever... plummeting into darkness...

A darkness broken by flames, only silhouetting the wasted figure in front of them. Harry felt hot blood in his mouth as he raised his wand.

“Not nearly enough. What else you got?” Harry taunted, spitting blood.

The figure’s wand rose, and a long black whip erupted out of the end of it.

“Ooh. Kinky.”

The whip exploded with blue-white flames, dripping tongues of fire onto the stained floor.

“Okay, maybe not...”

A crack of the whip, a shattering of sound and silence, a break in the world, in reality...

And in the end, all he felt was pain. Stretched from every angle, everything locked in a searing embrace of pain beyond pain, an agony beyond that of one’s body, only in the soul... he couldn’t move, he couldn’t black out, he wanted to end it, kill this hateful universe he was in –

And then he heard the voice, echoing everywhere, contemplation tainted with triumph...

“Well, this won’t do... there’s hardly room for three here. I think it’s time to make a little... space.”

* * *

“What the hell were you thinking, Snape, trying to breach that barrier?” Lupin said, half-guiding, half-pulling the weakened Potions Professor up the path towards Hogwarts. The man had been gasping and choking on a froth of blood when the werewolf had found him, but a few muttered healing spells had restored Snape to a modicum of health. If it wasn’t for the scorch marks on the man’s dark robes and the unnaturally pallid shade of his face, nobody would have the slightest clue that Snape had only barely escaped death.

“It wasn’t... I was provoked,” Snape muttered, his eyes glazed as he staggered up the path.

“Provoked by what, Snape? The fact that Sirius was inside, and you could have killed him?” Lupin asked accusingly. “Damn it, Snape, you’ve got to get over that grudge, I’ve told Sirius that for years –”

Snape suddenly stopped, and Lupin nearly fell as he tried to keep a firm grip on the man.

“Come on, what’s the hurry –”

Snape pointed up the path, towards the school. “It... it’s impossible...”

Lupin looked up towards the school, and his eyes widened. Silver lines were rising up, into the sky, encapsulating the castle in a webbed hemisphere of magic...

“What... what is it?” Lupin gasped. It seemed like the very air was tingling, charged with magic...

“I don’t know,” Snape asked, beginning to tremble. His dark eyes were wide – but not with awe.

With horror.

“We have to get up to the school,” Lupin whispered, even as the silvery lines began to squirm in the air, reflecting a dozen colours over the path like a bouncing rainbow. “Dumbledore... he must –”

“This is power beyond his ken – and beyond mine,” Snape whispered. “No intentionally cast magic could create this....”

“Create what?”

“A nightmare,” Snape murmured, shaking as every single thread of light turned a bloody red, coating the sky and path in a hellish glow. “It’s out of control... multiple spells disjoined, forming a Dark magic that even the Dark Lord dares not contemplate, for the cost is far too high.”

“But what – do you know what it is?”

Snape looked down at Lupin, and the werewolf could feel the cold chill flooding from Snape’s eyes surge into his own.

“Sanity, Lupin. Sanity... and souls.”

* * *

Harry came to consciousness very slowly, and even as he did, everything felt wrong. His eyelids felt too light, his face felt different upon his head, his body felt radically different beneath the sheet...

The white sheet.

His eyes snapped wide open, and he slowly pushed against the sheet, pressing lightly against the cool fabric...

Which vanished at the touch of his hands, revealing the brightly lit room.

A fire was burning merrily in the grate, and Harry could feel the warmth suffuse the entire room as he slowly sat up. Even the stone felt warm against his body and his hairless legs –

He froze, and looked down at his nude body – the nude body of a woman.

“T-Tonks?” he asked hesitantly. Almost immediately, he raised his hand to his mouth, for the voice coming out of his mouth was not that of a young man.

“And a good morning to you too,” a grumbling voice said from the side of the room. Harry looked quickly, to see a rather disheveled Tonks separating clothes and piling them on her desk. The five books were neatly stacked, and Harry could see the wide bandage wrapped around Tonks’ arm.

Harry began breathing very quickly – only to discover the strange lumps sitting upon his – or rather, her – chest. This only caused Harry to breathe faster and faster. This is bizarre, this is wrong, something went bad with the ritual –

“Welcome to the life of Clarissa Desdame,” Tonks said, a grin spreading across her face, even despite the deep hollows under her eyes. “A sexy blonde twenty-something who rose very quickly in her law firm – a firm that is representing one Harry Potter during his legal difficulties...”

“Tonks, I’m a girl!”

“No, you’re possessing the body of one. And I must say, I did a damn fine job with the shaping spells too.” Tonks sighed with satisfaction as she dropped a heavy box on the table with an audible thud. “Nobody will have the slightest clue that your body was once Aphrodite Zabini.”

Harry’s hand went to the long curly blonde hair rolling down his body’s back. He swallowed hard as he began to pull himself into a standing position. It felt extremely strange, his every action – like he

was controlling a marionette with exceptionally short, exceptionally fine strings. One thing was for sure – he had never felt anything like this before.

“So... so this is what it feels like –”

“Hardly,” Tonks cut him off with a snort. “Don’t go getting any kinky ideas there, Harry Potter, because inside, you’re still a young man that I enjoy messing around with. Now, be careful getting up, because the last thing we need is for you to fall flat on your face and bruise that gorgeous body of yours.”

Harry cautiously looked around before placing his delicate feet on the floor – a floor strangely glowing with golden lines, linking his table with the one where his body – his real body – was lying.

“Uh, Tonks, are those golden lines supposed to be there?”

“What golden lines?” Tonks asked sharply, looking up from her rummaging. “I don’t see any lines...”

“Well, I do,” Harry replied, cautiously trying to stand on the floor and gain his balance. He didn’t know if this body had the same balance that his own did. “Is that... is that a side-effect of the ritual or something?”

Tonks frowned. “Probably – if anything, they might only visible to you, linking your simulacrum to your original body, a magical ‘leyline’ of sorts connecting your consciousness...”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Tonks agreed, darting around behind Harry to steady him as he took a few, tentative steps.

“I can barely balance anything!” Harry said, a note of panic creeping into his voice. “I can barely stand up, let alone walk.”

“Well, for once somebody’s clumsier than me,” Tonks muttered. “Anyways, that’s not the point, and you don’t have a lot of time. The school governors are meeting tonight.”

“What? T-that’s impossible!” Harry nearly stumbled in his shock. “How long was I out?”

“Longer than I expected, frankly,” Tonks admitted, helping Harry walk over to the table – an experience Harry found beyond bizarre, considering he was attempting to control a woman’s body that was also completely naked. “But you should thank me – while you’ve been unconscious, I’ve been using Memory Charms on Madam Pomfrey, making her think you’ve been gravely ill in the hospital wing. And I may have moved your body down there a few times to fool any visitors.”

“Dumbledore?”

“All he knows is that you’re on a deep-cover mission, and that it’s in your hands,” Tonks replied with a heavy sigh as Harry finally placed his hands on the table. “The good news is that I managed to arrange a meeting with Nathan Cassane this afternoon – in about four hours, as a matter of fact.”

Harry couldn’t even stammer a reply to that. All he could remember at that second was Dumbledore’s words: that he had to convince Nathan Cassane to care.

“Anyways, we don’t have a huge amount of time,” Tonks finished briskly pulling another pile of clothes out of the box. “The key here will be letting your simulacrum’s muscle memory take over the basic actions – like walking in heels, and such.”

“What?”

Tonks smirked. “Time to get you dressed, beautiful. Cassane’s a high class man – you’ll want to look your best.”

* * *

“So?”

“So what?” Draco Malfoy whispered furiously. “You don’t care, Nott? Potter kills, and you don’t care?”

“There’s no proof he did –”

“Oh, I don’t know, the lack of a living Aphrodite Zabini might be the first clue!” Malfoy snarled, breathing very quickly as he glared at Nott. Both of them were in one of Nott’s favourite hideouts – one of the ignored corners of the library. “I have this from my father, and he’s not one to lie to me!”

“So what was his explanation for the supposedly horrible wound he received in battle with Potter?” Nott asked with a cold sneer. “I heard the Dark Lord was most displeased at Lucius’ failure. Probably not as disappointed as Narcissa, but still –”

Malfoy went red, and he had to restrain himself from seizing Nott’s collar. “Worst of all, Blaise still doesn’t know.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

“How could I? It’s his mother, for Merlin’s sake! He might deserve to know the truth –”

“I’d like to think so,” a new voice said from the shadows between the shelves.

Malfoy felt the blood drain from his face as Blaise Zabini walked from between the shelves. The dark-skinned boy was breathing very fast, sheer rage on his face. Malfoy fought to keep his own composure – Blaise rarely got angry, and when he did, the targets of his anger seldom lasted long.

“Your father said Potter was responsible?”

“Yes. Look, Blaise, I know what you’re thinking –”

Blaise slammed his hand on the table, a deadly look on his face. “Shut up, Draco. Nott, is it ready?”

“Well, after that weird magical fireworks display a few nights ago –”

“I thought you said you triple-checked everything!” Malfoy said angrily. “Damn it, Nott, if you’ve been cutting out on us –”

“I did triple-check everything!” Nott snarled, slamming his book shut and rising to his feet. “And as far as I know, we’re safe. I can activate everything tonight, if you want!”

“Do it,” Zabini growled, his eyes blood-shot from grief that Malfoy knew his friend never showed. “Make Potter suffer.”

* * *

“There it is,” Tonks whispered, pointing out at the stately house sitting on the hill, the lawns surrounded by an old black, iron fence casting long shadows in the sunlight. “That’s the legendary Cassane House.”

“It’s in the middle of nowhere,” Harry whispered back, fidgeting uncomfortably as he stood behind the tree, anxiously smoothing the long blonde hair his simulacrum possessed. “Why would anybody live here? Are you sure that Cassane even lives here? I mean, look at the ivy all over the fence!”

“Oh, trust me, he lives there,” Tonks replied with a grin. “Good luck, Clarissa – you’re going to need it.”

Harry reflexively smoothed his neat dress robes – cut considerably tighter than his usual ones, but he guessed that Tonks had intended that. “Do I look good?”

Tonks snorted. “Forget looks, Harry, that’s not what Cassane will be looking for. Remember your arguments – they’ll be the keys here.”

“Right,” Harry replied with a nod. “And you’ll be coming to –”

But Tonks had already Disapparated with a wink. Harry waited for a few seconds, and then, with a sigh, he walked up the cobblestone path towards the massive gate.

The gateposts were cracked, and to Harry’s surprise, looked like they were made of simple, common stone. Nothing fancy, nothing special – only a stone arch, with simple words carved across it.

Altissimus sublimitas planto vel effrego a vir.

Harry looked uncertainly around the gate. Nobody was waiting for him – was he to let himself in?

Slowly, he reached a delicate hand out to touch the gate – which dissolved beneath his hands.

I guess I’m to invite myself in, then.

The cobblestone path meandered between the seemingly randomly placed trees, and Harry found himself relaxing. The sun was shining, the air was crisp, and if it wasn’t for the fact he was possessing a woman’s body, he would actually feel like he was enjoying himself.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

Harry paused, and turned towards the voice. Just next to the path, there was a small, well-worn park bench, sitting beneath the shadow of a tree. And on that bench was a man.

The man was reaching the end of his middle years, his hair already turned a distinguished silver beneath his faded brown cap. His clothes seemed used, but also well-cared for, fitting very well across the man’s broad frame, not yet bent or broken by age. But it was the man’s face that caught Harry’s attention: lined heavily around the eyes and mouth, it still retained a vestige of the firmness of youth. And the eyes... the second Harry met the man’s eyes, he was

reminded of Dumbledore – but while Dumbledore’s blue eyes had danced and sparkled, this man’s brown eyes had a simple look to them that seemed just as magical.

“I’m sorry for interrupting you,” Harry began reluctantly, still feeling awkward with his new voice. “I’m... I’m just heading up to the house.”

“As am I,” the older man replied with a hint of a grin on his face. “Would you care to join me on my trip?”

“I... I guess,” Harry replied uncomfortably as the man rose to his feet. He wasn’t incredibly tall – about the same height as Sirius – but there was something about the man that seemed bigger, as if his presence of personality added an inch.

They began walking up the stone path in silence, the older man’s pace somewhat erratic as he would slow to marvel at a tree or a particularly well-placed stone.

“Too few people appreciate natural beauty,” the man finally said, his strong hand caressing a large, slate boulder protruding from the ground. Lined with ivy, it cast a large, but comforting, shadow over the path. “This was not placed by magic, that I can tell you.”

Harry frowned. “But wouldn’t magic... I dunno, help make things look more to their owner’s liking?”

“Too much magic never makes for simple landscaping, my dear,” the older man said with a simple smile as he returned to the path and they kept walking. “Would these trees be improved by the addition of a pruning spell or a scented enchantment?”

“I can only presume you’re the gardener, then,” Harry replied wryly, “to hold such a view. Do you take care of these plants?”

“Just the lawns, really,” the man replied with a hint of a smile as he ran his wrinkled, callused hand along the tree. “The trees I leave alone – I’m of the opinion that if they wanted us to prune them, they’d tell us.”

Harry was about to say that trees don't talk, but catching the man's gaze, he chose to keep quiet.

It didn't take long for the two to reach the house, and Harry could only gape in shock at the building. It didn't look nearly as impressive close up – indeed, it looked like a building neglected for decades while its owner was doing other things. But the neglect, brought by spreading ivy and cracks in the stone, did very little to diminish the house's appearance – if anything, it only made the building seem as distinguished as the man walking beside him.

Harry couldn't deny it – there was history there, and he respected, at the very least.

“Come in, come in,” the older man said, stepping up onto the creaking porch and pulling the door open with a tug. “I'm sure whoever you're here to see will arrive shortly.”

“You mean... this isn't the house of Nathan Cassane?” Harry asked, confusion filling his voice, and a sick feeling filling up his stomach. Had Tonks made a mistake about the house?

The older man smiled. “Oh, he's here, I'm sure. Go into the drawing room – he'll be there shortly. Down the hall, second door on the right.”

Harry nodded, and with his heels clicking on the hardwood floor, he went down the wood-paneled hall and opened the door...

To step into a room of magic.

Brass instruments whirled through the air of their own accord, clicking and whistling peculiarly as they formed arches of metal. The tables in the room were strewn with papers and small boxes, all sealed with a strange brass fastening that Harry wasn't even sure how he could open. The few lamps in the room glowed of their own accord, casting a warm, friendly light over the room. Most of the light came through the massive windows cut in the ceiling, held open by ivy and stout

oaken beams, from which hung a massive one-person aeroplane built of wood (and from Harry's guess, a considerable bit of magic).

Moving paintings lined all the walls of the huge room, and between the paintings were bookshelves, filled to the brim with papers and massive tomes that Harry guessed were easily a century old. Only a single wall was left free of the paintings – a wall with a massive, incredibly detailed map of the world, complete with tiny moving ships and blinking flags. Harry stepped up to the map which was easily twice his height, his eyes widening with awe as he saw lines trace the map and vanish again as he watched....

“It's beautiful, isn't it?”

Harry spun quickly, to see the older man leaning against the doorpost, a wistful look upon his face.

“It's... it's wonderful,” Harry whispered. “I've never seen the like of it —”

“And you probably never will again,” the man replied sadly, removing his cap as he approached the map. “It's the last of its kind, coveted by many men who would see it destroyed.”

“Why would a man destroy something this beautiful?”

“Can you think of no reasons, my dear?” the man said, closing his eyes for a few moments as he turned towards a table. “That map represents a world of magic, Miss Desdame, and the eddies of its flow, if you believe such things.”

“Do you?”

The man smiled enigmatically as he opened one of the small chests with a tap of his wand and withdrew a tiny silver spyglass. “There is beauty in fiction, my dear, but there's always a greater beauty in reality.”

Harry suddenly froze. “I never told you my name.”

“I know.”

“But you knew it anyways.”

The man smiled a secret smile. “Perhaps.”

“You’re Nathan Cassane.”

“And you represent Harry Potter in his legal case,” the man replied, placing the silver spyglass on a tiny bronze stand angled at the map. A second later, a brilliant beam of golden light erupted from the spyglass, tracing a small circle on the map.

“I am representing him,” Harry replied steadily, even as the man replaced the spyglass in its chest, seemingly satisfied. “But you are not... you are not...”

Nathan Cassane shook his head with another smile. “Not who you expected, my dear. I’m well aware. Hardly a prepossessing figure, worthy of such titles.”

“I didn’t say that!” Harry protested, but Nathan Cassane was already laughing.

“Of course you didn’t, Miss Desdame. James Potter did, nineteen years ago.”

Harry could barely stop his mouth from falling open. This old man had known his father, and it took all of his self control to prevent him from blurting out a question that would surely have blown his cover. I might have to come back here under my own guise...

“That, however, was a different life ago, my dear. Tell me about the case set against his son,” Cassane replied, pulling a brass instrument out of the air and carefully screwing onto the end of his wand.

Harry swallowed hard, and as he watched Cassane weave magic with the brass instruments, he opened the ‘case file’ he had brought

and told Cassane the details he and Tonks had agreed were 'necessary.'

It was a long ten minutes before Cassane had unscrewed the device from the end of his wand and set it back into its orbit around the room, and Harry waited expectantly – and nervously – as the old man finally set down his wand.

"It seems like Harry Potter has been through a lot – and it seems that much of his case hinges on whether or not you believe Lord Voldemort has returned."

Harry nearly forgot to be startled with Cassane's casual usage of Voldemort's name. "So... do you believe it?"

"It would not be a good thing to believe," Cassane replied simply, "as you have undoubtedly seen."

"Dumbledore believes it."

"Dumbledore believes in the best of everyone," Cassane said somberly, drumming his fingers along the table as he began to pace. "Regardless of... past experiences. He is a good man – although some days, he really begins to worry me."

"Would you believe Harry Potter if he told you?" Harry pursued quickly. "If he could give you evidence?"

"Let me ask you a question, Miss Desdame – is this a matter of belief, or of truth?" Cassane asked unexpectedly. "Because the two are very different, and too many people tend to forget that."

"It's a matter of truth," Harry said cautiously.

"Then why are you asking me to believe?" Cassane chuckled a bit as he moved towards the map. "Do you see the lines forming across the map, and then vanishing a second later?"

"Yes..."

“Those lines are formed by the motion of powerful magic – typically Portkeys and other methods of magical transportation, or so I have hypothesized,” Cassane said, gesturing to the map. “Now let me ask you this – did you believe, when I told you a few minutes ago, that the lines were formed by ‘eddies of magic’?”

“I did,” Harry replied cautiously.

“So what is the truth?”

Harry frowned. “They both are... aren’t they?”

Cassane did laugh then. “They could be, my dear, but they also could be completely different. It’s all a hypothesis, and even I don’t know the true ‘answer’. But we can choose to believe... and sometimes, that makes all the difference.”

“So... who do you believe in?” Harry asked tentatively, trying to follow the rather strange discussion.

Cassane shook his head wistfully as he looked up at the map. “Do you see the little flags on the map?”

“I do.”

“Each flag represents a place I have been, and where I have seen something beautiful – magical or not.” Cassane looked away from Harry for a second, and Harry felt a lump building in the back of my throat. “Some I can return to see again, others were naught but for an instant. So let me ask you this, Miss Desdame: I have spent my life seeking the last fragments of beauty in this world, whether they are in the distant tombs or the highest mountains, so why would I care about such a case, bereft of light and a belief in good?”

Harry closed his eyes, even as his heart pounded in his chest. In truth, he knew he didn’t have an answer. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had marveled at the beauty, the mystique, of magic. It

had become a tool – nothing more, nothing less. It all seemed so dark, so lost in shadows and fire and blood...

“Because Voldemort will destroy beauty wherever he sees it.”

Cassane seemed to consider this for a few moments as he continued to look at the map. “Too true, my dear, too true. Men like him delight in destroying the good – if only because they are terrified to look within themselves.”

Harry swallowed hard at the implication – was he too afraid to look inside himself?

“Lord Voldemort does not see the tree when he looks outside, Miss Desdame – and several years ago, in the grim heat of the darkness and the chill of the vacant twilight, neither did I.” Cassane turned to Harry, a contemplative look on his face as he looked deep into Harry’s eyes. “Now I see it. So I ask you this: do you see the tree? Would Harry Potter see it?”

“I wish I could,” Harry whispered, blinking rapidly as he struggled to control the emotion in his voice, “and deep down, I think Harry wishes it too.”

* * *

“So you’re still not sure with Cassane?” Tonks asked, as Harry sat heavily on the steps of the marble staircase, back in his own body. The Entrance Hall was abandoned – the only reason Harry was ‘allowed’ out of bed was because of Dumbledore’s permission – the meeting of the school governors had gone long into the night. Many of the torches were dimmed, casting the hall with strange, flickering shadows.

“I wish I could believe he’s on our side,” Harry muttered. “But honestly... I don’t understand him. He’s... different, I think. Powerful, I bet... but different. Reminds me of Dumbledore a bit, really.”

“ I can sympathize, then, because nobody understands Dumbledore,” Tonks concluded, taking a heavy swig from her goblet. “By the way, I hid your simulacrum in that secret passage that Fred and George told me about – you know, the one behind the mirror.”

“I thought it was caved in?”

“There was enough room. Not much, but enough.”

There was silence for a few seconds as Harry toyed with his wand, his eyes hooded as he thought in silence. Cassane had been cryptic in his comments – would he support Harry, or damn him?

The sound of opening doors resounded through the entire hall, and Harry and Tonks were both on their feet as Dumbledore entered the castle.

“Well?” Harry asked quickly, moving close to the Headmaster.

Dumbledore’s face finally broke into a grin. “We won. The counter-measure went through.”

Harry closed his eyes as relief flooded his body. It wasn’t over yet, but for once, they had won a round. It might have been a hollow victory, but it was something.

“So when’s the interrogation?” Tonks asked, a small smile on her face. “And given it’s on our terms...”

“It’s planned for November, at the moment, but that could always change if needed,” Dumbledore said with a hint of a smile. His eyes sparkled as they landed on Harry. “And by the way, Nathan Cassane wishes to meet with you. It may require a bit of clever logistics, but I’m sure we could manage something.”

“What about Umbridge?” Harry asked eagerly. “Did you get a chance to talk to Cassane about it?”

“He knows about it,” Dumbledore replied firmly. “Umbridge will not be attempting to intimidate you in this way again. I do expect, though, that she may attempt... other tactics to subvert my authority here, so be on your guard. Now, if you two would excuse me, I must attend to some personal matters, and I look forward to seeing you, Harry, at breakfast tomorrow morning.”

The second Dumbledore was out of sight, Harry could hardly restrain a whoop.

“Looks like things are finally going right,” Tonks said with a satisfied smile, clapping Harry on the shoulder. “Come on – maybe we’ll be able to get some sleep tonight –”

“Oh, I really wouldn’t count on that.”

Harry’s eyes snapped up, narrowing as they focused on Peeves. “And why won’t I get any sleep tonight, Peeves?”

Tonks looked up and frowned. “Harry, he’s not here.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry snapped, pointing upwards at the cackling poltergeist. “He’s right... there...”

“She can’t see me,” Peeves said with a smirk. “Although it’s a bit of a shame, but I’m not the one who makes the rules – not anymore.”

“What rules?” Harry growled. “Peeves, what the hell is going on?”

“Ask him about the Death Eaters,” Tonks muttered.

“Oh, I was just thinking you’d like to see the, ah, fruit of your labours,” Peeves said with a demonic grin. “Would you care to follow me? Trust me – you’ll really want to.”

Harry took a steadying breath. “Tonks, I’m going after Peeves.”

“Well, I’m coming with you. Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team, remember?” Tonks tapped Harry on the shoulder. “Let’s go track your invisible poltergeist –”

And that’s when they heard it.

A single, shrill scream.

The hairs on the back of Harry’s neck stood up, and without a word, he broke into a run, the stairs loud beneath his feet as Peeves cackled and roared with demented laughter as he soared up the stairs ahead of them...

“Down the corridor, he went towards Ravenclaw Tower!” Harry shouted, pointing at the poltergeist, flying even faster down the narrow hall. “Whoever screamed is probably down here!”

But there was not even an echo of the scream remaining. Peeves had vanished, and there was no laughter in the halls – only the whistle of wind, and the crackling of torches....

“Harry, there’s a door open down there...” Tonks whispered. “It might have come from there...”

Harry drew his wand and cautiously approached the door, preparing himself for whatever might appear...

He rounded the corner, and his breath caught in his chest at the sight.

Four girls were sprawled in a circle, legs spread wide, wearing only their underwear. All had pale skin and black hair – and all of them were in Ravenclaw. Two of them looked like first years, one was a girl who looked like she was in Harry’s year, and the fourth –

“Cho!”

The girl’s head lolled grotesquely on the floor, and for the first time, Harry could see the circle of blood scrawled on the floor, the

bloodstained panties the girls were wearing, the brutal slashes on their wrists, the bloodstains up the walls instead of down...

And the words, floating and dripping as they hung in the air, words that made a sick feeling well up inside him.

ALL FOR YOU, HARRY POTTER.

Author's Notes: I know this chapter is a little shorter, and it leaves somewhat of the cliffhanger last chapter unexplained, but don't worry - it will be dealt with in later chapters. It wasn't included in this chapter due to pacing concerns. I honestly hope those who said they'd refuse to read any further continue to read this chapter - I feel they'd like this chapter far more. As always, read, criticize, review, and enjoy!

“No, please, no, don't be dead, please...”

“Just unconscious, it seems,” Tonks said quickly, blinking quickly as she pointed her wand at one of the first year girls. “Enervate. Enervate. Oh, come on, wake up!”

“This is worse than unconscious, Tonks, the blood stains are spreading up the walls!” Harry said, very real panic filling his voice as he pointed at the walls. “They're dying, and those letters are only getting bigger —”

“Deletrius!” Tonks snapped, pointing her wand at the bleeding message — but to no avail. They still hovered in the center of the circle, a damning indictment...

Harry felt bile rise in his throat as he knelt next to Cho, looking around desperately as her head lolled on the floor. “We've got to do something!”

Tonks shot to her feet, the first traces of fear filling her own voice. “They can't be seen like this — you can't be seen like this! We've got to get out of here now! Come on —”

“We can't just leave them like —”

“Harry, if Umbridge sees this — if anyone sees this —”

Harry thought wildly as he rose to his own feet, looking at the damning words hovering in the room. “Dumbledore — he knows I wouldn't have done this to the girls —”

“We need to leave, and find a teacher who’s on our side,” Tonks whispered frantically, tearing open the door and looking carefully down the hall. “Try running for the Entrance Hall, I’m sure you can find someone –”

“Right,” Harry said, trying desperately to regain control. Turning away from the ghastly scene, he shoved his way through the door and began to run towards the stairs. Surely someone would –

“Watch where you’re going, Potter!”

“Professor!” Harry said, his eyes widening as he barely managed to skid to a halt at the edge of the staircase. “I need your help, there’s been an attack!”

Professor McGonagall’s thin eyebrows narrowed as she straightened her travelling cloak. “An attack, Mr. Potter?”

“Four Ravenclaw girls, they’re dying, and it’s implicating me as the attacker!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Professor McGonagall asked with a note of surprise creeping into her voice. “You’ve been with Auror Tonks all evening!”

“I know, but –” Harry looked around frantically before lowering his voice – both Professors Flitwick and Sprout were coming up the stairs, and Harry knew they weren’t in the Order. “If Umbridge sees this...”

“I say, Mr. Potter, why are you – Merlin’s beard, you’re covered in blood!” Flitwick exclaimed, his thin voice only getting higher as Harry swallowed hard.

“Filius, according to Potter, there’s been an attack, and he’s been implicated,” McGonagall said sharply. “Pomora, get Albus immediately. Filius, find Poppy and Severus and get them up here. I’ll investigate this personally.”

“Severus is gone again, Minerva, and none of us know where he is –” Flitwick began helplessly.

“Then get Madam Pomfrey, and hurry!” Harry shouted, his nerves already strained to the breaking point. “As soon as Umbridge or H.A.I.T. sees –”

“Potter!”

Harry’s face went pale, and the cold lump of fear coalesced in his stomach as he turned towards the hall from where he had left the girls. Standing at the end of the hall – short, toad-like, and red-faced with fury – was Dolores Umbridge, dressed in iron grey robes that made her look like a rather hideous boulder.

And behind her stood four, grim-faced members of H.A.I.T. that Harry didn’t recognize – all with drawn wands.

“Pomora, go. Now,” McGonagall hissed quietly, her own thin wand sliding free. “Filius –”

“I would be better here than –”

“The less of us dragged into this, the better!” McGonagall snapped, her wand raising a fraction towards Umbridge, who was screaming something incomprehensible down the hall at the Hit Wizards. “Go, Filius!”

Harry drew his wand quickly, even as Flitwick began to move as fast as his short legs could carry him. “Professor –”

“Potter, this is beyond your skill to handle,” McGonagall replied curtly, even as the H.A.I.T. members began to move down the hall. “And the last thing we need is you getting implicated for more crimes –”

“There’s Potter, Stun him!”

Harry instinctively dove to the side as three bolts of red light streaked down the hallway – three bolts McGonagall effortlessly parried with a wave of her wand, conjuring a fine shield of white light that sent the bolts bouncing away to dissipate into the walls.

“What is the meaning of this?” McGonagall barked. “He’s a student, and this is completely out of line!”

“And aiding a criminal is?” Umbridge shrieked. “Take her, you idiots! Now!”

More red light erupted down the corridor, but McGonagall conjured the same white shield again, a look of disdain crossing her face as she began to effortlessly parry the attacks. Harry looked around wildly, thinking desperate of where he could even run. Dumbledore’s office, he decided, beginning to run up the stairs –

Only to see Dmitri Kemester standing at the edge of the next landing, his teeth bared in furious hatred – with two more H.A.I.T. members behind him.

“Going somewhere, Potter? Incarcerous!”

“Protego!”

Harry instinctively leapt to the side of the spell, and he looked around wildly to see who had cast the shield –

“I told you to run, Potter, go!”

And with that, McGonagall slashed her wand at the staircase. It shook, and began to move towards another landing, causing Kemester to yelp with surprise as the step scooted away beneath his feet. Harry heard a rattle, and before his astonished eyes, one of the moving suits of armor stepped off of its stand and drew its polearm, angling it towards Umbridge –

“Confringo!”

Harry began to run at McGonagall's oath as the suit of armor she controlled exploded into metal fragments. His trainers were slipping on the slick marble, but he knew if he could cut across the fifth floor, he could at least find another stairwell. Or if I' m lucky, I can find Dumbledore –

A bolt of blue light streaked past Harry's shoulder, and he reflexively dodged to the side, bounding off the wall towards the landing leading to the fifth floor. He chanced a glance up to see a flurry of lights and McGonagall slashing her wand violently, but Kemester had vanished...

“Peto terra!”

And a second later, the Hit Wizard had landed from his impossibly high leap, magic burning on his boots as he swung his wand around.

“Expelliarmus!”

Kemester snarled as his wand soared out his hand, but he was already moving towards Harry, his gloved fists swinging towards Harry's head.

“Flamma –”

CRACK.

Harry felt one of his ribs fracture as Kemester's hook slammed into it instead of his face. Clenching his teeth against the rush of pain, Harry ducked and scrambled back, his wand coming up.

“Flamma lacero!”

The wave of fire erupted from Harry's wand in a horizontal arc, but Kemester dove for the floor, scooping his wand up in his free hand as rolled to his feet, his wand in a dueling position and a dangerous look on his face as he began to back Harry down the hallway.

“Not going to fight fair, Potter? Caecus!”

Harry barely managed to dodge the white-hot light searing towards his face, but Kemester wasn't waiting for Harry to recover, launching two more spells that Harry didn't even recognize and only barely managed to dodge. I need to end this and get out of here!

“Reducto!”

“You're pathetic, Potter!” Kemester snarled, deflecting Harry's hurried curse with a quick slash of his wand. “Try some real magic! Gelumorsus!”

A wave of blackness erupted from the Hit Wizard's wand, and Harry felt the temperature in the hall drop. The cold was insidious, creeping through the corridor, frost caking the windows, creating a brittle reflection of Kemester's sneer...

Harry felt his restraint dying, and he raised his wand with a shaking hand. No Unforgivables, but there are other spells that can kill besides Avada Kedavra!

“Occupo scrinium!”

The pulsating beam of blood-red light erupting from Harry's wand sliced through the blackness, slicing straight through Kemester's quick Shield Charm to strike the Hit Wizard in the chest. He felt his wand buck in his hand as Kemester stumbled, clutching his chest, but the cold was only getting stronger, and he could feel his fingers growing numb. Think, damn it – what counters a spell of cold...

“Incendio!”

The flaming bolt sliced through the blackness, and Harry could feel warmth return to his hands – but Kemester was getting up too, his eyes bloodshot, his lips stained with red –

“Killing now, Potter?”

“Reducto!” Harry shouted, but Kemester deflected the curse, sending it into a suit of armor, making it fall into individual plates, clanging and rattling across the floor...

Suddenly, Harry had an idea. Diving under Kemester’s shouted curse, Harry seized the tiny iron dagger the suit of armor had possessed – one thing was for sure, he wasn’t going to be defenseless in close quarters again. His chest screamed with pain, but he didn’t care, wildly pointing at Kemester, who was charging forward –

“Depulso!”

It was like a wave made of jagged metal. All at once, the shattered pieces of armor clattered off the floor and rose into the air – to streak straight at Kemester. The Hit Wizard’s eyes widened, and he raised his wand to shield himself, but he was too close. The heavy gauntlets connected with his stomach, causing him to double over in pain – only to catch the breastplate, greaves, and helmet in the face. With a final groan, the Hit Wizard slumped over, just avoiding the shoulder guard and broadsword, which banged heavily against the wall.

Harry got to his feet and cautiously approached the Hit Wizard, his eyes blazing with hatred. He should finish the bastard, end him now. I’ve killed before, and he’s definitely one who deserves death...

“Dmitri! Damn it, where’s Potter?”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat – H.A.I.T. was close. He looked back down at the unconscious Hit Wizard, his breathing fast as he pointed his wand down towards the man who had done his best to ruin Harry’s life...

But they’ll see the flash of green, and they’ll know... and not even Dumbledore would be able to save me here...

“Kemester, you bastard, where are you?”

Harry made his decision – carefully picking up the man’s wand, he effortlessly snapped it with a loud crack. See how he likes being

powerless, he thought hatefully. Rising to his feet, he stepped over Kemester's body and ran for the stairs at the end of the hallway –

Only to see two unknown Hit Wizards running down the stairs. Their eyes went wide the second they saw Harry and their hands went to their wands, but he was ready this time.

“Stupefy! STUPEFY!”

The Stunning Spells sent the two men sprawling against the stairs, but Harry didn't care. Those girls are dying, I can't just stand here! He cursed himself for wasting time with Kemester as he charged up the stairs towards the room – he hadn't even thought to stop the bleeding, how stupid was he –

“It's Potter, take him down!”

Harry's eyes went wide at his newest adversaries. The Auror Wilson that Harry had met getting onto the train all those days earlier when he had impersonating Tonks...

And the Metamorphmagus herself – the one who had shouted, and who was already raising her wand to attack!

“Stupefy!”

“Expelliarmus!”

Harry felt his wand torn from his hand by Tonks' spell, but Wilson crumpled beside her, his Shield Charm a shade too late. Tonks smiled triumphantly as she deftly caught Harry's wand and leveled it at him, but he was already moving, rage propelling every step, taking a page out of Kemester's playbook as he charged...

“Glisseo!”

Harry swore violently as his feet skidded on the suddenly slick floor, falling hard on the stone. Searing pain erupted from his ankles and

forearm, but he was still sliding towards Tonks, already aiming the two wands at Harry –

“Oh no... you don’t!” Harry snarled, scrabbling for traction as he slid across the floor towards her, coming in fast – too fast. Tonks’ eyes widened as she began to cast a spell, but it was too late – Harry had already bowled her over, sending their wands flying as they scrabbled on the ground.

“You betray me like this?” Harry roared, seizing a hold of Tonks’ wrist as he worked to pin her to the floor. “After everything we’ve been through –”

“You’re the criminal, after all!” Tonks spat, bringing her knee towards Harry’s groin. Harry twisted, but he still howled as pain rocketed up his leg at the impact. He wasn’t giving in, though – not to her. He shoved himself forwards, straddling her stomach and seizing her other hand, pinning it –

But he had too much forward momentum, and Tonks’ kick sent him sprawling to the floor. Harry twisted to meet her attack, but Tonks’ next kick connected with Harry’s chest, knocking him flat against the stone. He could barely breathe as the Auror pounced on top of him, her knees planted on either side of him, her hand squeezing his head against the rock...

“T-traitor...” Harry wheezed, trying to claw his hands free, but he had no leverage, and Tonks had a victorious smile on her face.

“Just to show you that I’m always on top,” Tonks whispered back, leaning close and kissing Harry savagely on the throat. He felt her teeth, and despite himself, he shivered as Tonks’ lips slid towards his ear...

“Play along.”

And in the corner of Harry’s eye, he could swear he saw Tonks wink.

Harry's eyes snapped wide, and he was about to say something, but Tonks pressed her lips against his, cutting off any sound as she kissed him viciously, her tongue filling his mouth. He felt his muscles slacken, his pain strangely muting. If this is the way female Aurors bring in their captives, I might just start a crime spree...

But then the kiss was broken, and Tonks bounded to her feet, leaving a confused Harry sprawled on the floor. She scooped up her wand with a single motion, leaving Harry's behind –

He saw his chance, and he took it. Grabbing his wand, he pointed wildly at Tonks' retreating figure.

“Glisseo!”

And for the first time that night, he laughed as Tonks fell spectacularly down the corridor, her bad balance only worse without friction as she crashed into a suit of armor, barely avoiding the adjacent torch. Grinning with triumph, he rose to his feet...

Only to see six H.A.I.T. members – the four who had been fighting McGonagall, and the two who had come down with Kemester – run down the corridor, wands drawn and spraying sparks.

“We've got him! Stupefy!”

Harry's eyes went wide, and he raised his wand to attempt to block the spells...

But none of the Stunning Spells connected. A silvery shield had erupted in their path, blocking every spell with a tinkling chime. Harry could only gasp as he turned to see the caster –

“Dumbledore!”

The Headmaster's eyes blazed, and in that second, Harry again realized why Voldemort had feared the old wizard. Even as the assorted Hit Wizards and Aurors scrambled for spells that might

break the silver shield, Dumbledore was already moving. A single sweep of his wand sent them sprawling with a wave of white-hot air.

“Too many lines have been crossed here,” Dumbledore said, chill power filling his every word. “And unfortunately, blind obedience has only placed you in a place you’d rather not be. You might want to remedy that.”

Scrambling to their feet, the H.A.I.T. members did exactly that.

They ran for their lives.

“Professor, I –”

“Not now, Harry, there’s no time,” Dumbledore interrupted, raising his wand and dispelling the silver shield with a wave. Another wave, and Harry felt the broken rib mend, the pain fading away. “Umbridge will be attempting to call more Ministry forces to seize this school – something I, ah, object to at this time.”

“I bet,” Harry said, swallowing hard.

“Finding her is my first priority, Harry, but it is essential that you get to safety –”

“I can fight!” Harry snarled. “I beat Kemester, and I’m not going to let that hag take over this school!”

Dumbledore regarded Harry with a thoughtful gaze for a few seconds before giving Harry a terse nod. “Very well, Harry. We’ve lost Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick is occupied trying to save his students – those poor girls – so your assistance would be welcome. Follow me and –”

The howl split the air, and Harry felt a chill run down his spine at the sound. It was terrible – as if a wolf had been brutally attacked – and yet Harry knew that it came from a human throat.

“Kemester,” Harry whispered.

“He is out of control – Bones made a grave mistake putting him on H.A.I.T.,” Dumbledore agreed. “A man consumed by grief and rage, but one who can still be redeemed.”

Harry could hardly believe his ears, and his mouth fell open with fury as he rushed towards the stairs, scorched from a dozen spells. “Professor, that man nearly killed me! He bloody beat me in an interrogation room!”

“Because you represent everything he hates about his life – and himself,” Dumbledore replied, moving next to Harry.

“I should have killed him when I had the chance,” Harry swore, his hand clenching tightly on his wand. “Would have been a damn kindness for you –”

“Harry, no!”

But Harry was already moving, for another yell had split the air, one that made Harry’s blood run cold. He knew that voice. He pushed himself faster, and he nearly missed the hallway, a floor below where he had dueled Kemester. Pulling himself around the corner, he sprinted towards the source of the noise and barely avoided an orange bolt that set a nearby portrait on fire.

“Harry!”

“Damn it, Ron, run!” Harry shouted, even as Ron leapt back from another curse from Kemester’s wand. His friend was clearly outclassed, and even the spells he had learned when helping Harry were only doing so much. And Ron wasn’t alone – none other than Neville Longbottom was standing behind him, his wand held in a shaking hand.

“Bringing your filthy friends along for the ride now, Potter?” Kemester roared, turning and firing a hot purple bolt at Harry that he only barely managed to dodge. Ron took that second to fire off a spell of his own, and the edge of Kemester’s pants caught fire. But it

wasn't enough to stop the enraged Hit Wizard, and the fire practically evaporated as Kemester's wand ripped through the air.

"Caecus!"

Harry could only yell helplessly as the spell hit Ron directly in the face. He howled in agony as he clutched at his eyes and stumbled backwards into Neville.

"I can't see, Harry, help –"

"I'm coming, Ron!" Harry shouted, doing the only thing he could think of that might slow down the Hit Wizard – ramming himself into the man and trying to tackle him down.

But Kemester easily outweighed Harry, and a second later, he felt himself sprawled on the floor, his chest burning and his arms searing with pain from a bad landing. Kemester loomed above him, his bloodshot eyes rimmed with hatred and his craggy face twisted with raw hatred.

"Next time, break both our wands if you want to bring down a Hit Wizard!" Kemester spat, pointing a new wand at Harry. Lightning crackled around the tip, and with a horrifying pang, Harry knew what spell Kemester was going to cast –

"ATRUM CHAIN –"

"CLARUS LEVITAS!" Harry screamed, pointing his wand at the man he hated.

He had remembered when his wand had connected to Voldemort's in the graveyard, how his wand had bucked and shook under the force of the connection. One thing was certain – this was nothing like that.

This was worse.

Purple bolts of electricity erupted from his wand, dueling with the blue-white bolts of Kemester's spell, stray bolts scorching the walls

and floor, his clothes smoldering from the electricity erupting everywhere. No closed circuit here – sheer magical power created a repulsion of dancing and racing charge.

Harry could barely see through the black marks in his vision by the light, but he could feel Kemester's strength behind his bolts – hard, brutal, fed with hatred and something more...

“No...” Harry growled, struggling to his feet as he extended his wand. The charge resisted his every move, and he had to fight for every inch he gained, but he wasn't going to let this bastard win and kill Ron or Neville. He's not going to win... that fucking bastard is not going to beat me here!

He felt the raw hatred and desperation pour through his body, giving him strength. He wasn't going to fall to this Hit Wizard, he wasn't going to lose. I've beaten Lord Voldemort in a duel of wills before, I can damn well beat Dmitri fucking Kemester!

“My brother's... murderer... is not going to beat... me!”

Harry's eyes flashed, and he felt his muscles in his arms bulge as he lifted his broken arm. Pain rocked his body, but he didn't allow himself to stagger. Focusing with all his might against the agony, he wrapped his fingers around the wand, holding it with both hands, fixing his eyes on the flashing bolts.

“Oh,” he whispered, “yes he is!”

The bolts broke, and Harry saw Kemester's eyes widen with shock –

BOOM.

The thunder sent Harry to his knees, blood streaming down the sides of his face from his ears, but the Hit Wizard was blown off his feet, the purple bolts blasting him down to the end of the corridor, against the stone railing on the landing with an audible crunch. His clothes were glowing with visible burns, and his wand nearly fell from

blackened fingers. His head was lolling weakly, bloodshot eyes barely open on a scorched face, his hair smoking faintly...

“Harry... Merlin, Harry, you have to –”

“Finish this,” Harry hissed. He was on his feet now, and he was moving, his feet crunching on the stone with every step. His wand was up, and rage was filling his bruised chest. There wasn’t going to be any mercy this time – both of them had gone too far that, Dumbledore’s redemption be damned.

Kemester’s eyes finally began to focus, and his wand began to tremble upwards in a shaking hand –

“Flamma lacero!”

The wave of fire was white hot, and blew Kester’s wand clean out of his hand – along with most of his hand.

“Flamma lacero!”

Kemester’s other arm was crushed against the wall, the fire shredding through muscle towards the bone –

“VERCUNDUS!”

The spell erupted out of Harry’s wand like a gunshot, roaring through the air like a cannonball, slamming into Kester like a catapult shot. It lifted him off his feet – and pitched him over the railing.

It was four stories down to the floor below – and it was a marble floor.

There was no scream. Only a sickening crunch.

Harry closed his eyes, a weight in his gut seeming to lift. It was over. He was dead.

Finally.

“Harry... Harry, I c-can't see –”

He turned to see Ron stagger forward, supported by a sweaty and shaking Neville. Harry noticed the whiteness of Neville's face – and the surprising firmness in his hands, even despite his shake.

“It was probably a Conjunctivitus Curse,” Harry said tensely, looking closely at Ron. “I don't know how to reverse it –”

“Harry, what did you do to him?” Ron asked, swallowing audibly. “I... I could hear thunder –d-did you kill – ”

“You should never have tried to fight him alone, Ron?” Harry murmured, turning to Neville. “Get him to the Hospital Wing, and hurry. Madam Pomfrey won't be there, but it's probably safer. I need to get to the Entrance Hall.”

“Why?”

“Because that's where Umbridge will be, and I'm going to show her the way out.” Harry clenched his jaw as he turned towards the stairs. “Preferably with a lot of fire and lightning.”

And before Neville could say a word, Harry began to run down the stairs, forcing back the pain in his chest with every breath – and the image of Kemester, toppling from the railing, battered and burned, with every step.

One thing's for damned sure, Harry thought to himself as he reached the base of the stairs, I'm not getting rid of this memory. No, I'm going to remember this.

He looked quickly at where Kemester had fallen – and he froze.

The body was gone.

There's no way he survived that fall, Harry thought furiously, looking around frantically, but there was nobody in sight. Perhaps a member of H.A.I.T. had quickly dragged away the body...

Another shout broke the air – but this one was not the bestial sound he had heard before. This one was far closer, higher and shriller – almost exultant.

“Umbridge must have gotten her reinforcements,” Harry muttered to himself, turning towards the hall, raising his wand and gritting his teeth as he strode down the hall towards the Entrance Hall –

Only to stop dead in his tracks at the top of the marble staircase, his eyes widening in sudden shock.

The Entrance Hall, brightly lit as always, was filled with people. A dozen stretchers lay by the doors, and nearly a score of Hit Wizards and Aurors were rushing into the room, spreading out and taking up positions around the hall, all with wands drawn and black cloaks thrown over their robes. And in the center of the room was Umbridge, yelling and pointing – at him.

“It’s Potter!” the woman screamed, pointing her stubby wand at Harry with a wild look in her eyes. “Take him now!”

“Bad idea, you hag!”

Harry’s eyes snapped up to the two marble balconies encircling the hall, where two heavy wooden crates were precariously placed on the ancient railings – and where Fred and George were standing, two identical looks of triumph on their faces.

“Hope you like fireworks!” Fred shouted, and at that, the two boxes fell off of the railings, striking the floor with two shattering bangs. Harry flung his arm over his eyes and dove for cover, already knowing what was coming –

BOOM.

The stench of gunpowder filled the hall, and Harry cautiously opened his eyes to see a pitched battle already beginning: Umbridge’s reinforcements against tens – no, hundreds – of explosive, flaming

fireworks. Green and gold dragons made of fire, pink and silver Catherine wheels whistling sinisterly through the air, sparklers writing swear words and detonating at random, howling manticores made of what appeared to be blue fire, and a gigantic, tentacle-covered thing made of what looked like purple flames!

“Like this?” George shouted, running over to where Harry was getting to his feet. “Weasley’s Wildfire Whizbangs!’ Our entire stock!”

“That’ll hold them!” Fred yelled, shooting back a runaway draconic firework with a jet of sparks. “There ain’t much that can stop that bunch – it’s an entire bloody army!”

“Can you stop them?” Harry shouted over the din and dodging a blast of fire from one of the manticores that had bounded up the stairs. George sent the creature tumbling back down the stairs with a quick blast of his wand.

“Harry, would we create something we couldn’t stop?” Fred shouted with a wild smirk.

“Probably!” Harry yelled, raising his wand to defend himself.

“Don’t worry!” Fred called out over the din. “There’s a keyword that’ll take all of them out –”

A white flash split the room, and a second later, the Entrance Hall fell abruptly silent. Hit Wizards alike looked around the room, their eyes wide at the sudden silence – and absence of fireworks.

The twins exchanged horrified glances before turning back to the massive battlefield. A single figure – who had just entered the hall through the front doors – was lowering his wand. Harry squinted to see the man’s features – he did seem familiar – but a hood was thrown over the man’s face, and the smoke was making it hard to see details –

“What are you waiting for?” Umbridge screamed. “Arrest them!”

“I don’t think that’ll be happening today, Dolores.”

The dust and smoke filling the hall only made his entrance more impressive. Stepping out of the corridor opposite Harry’s, a terrible expression on his face, his wand drawn and gleaming with white light, Dumbledore’s eyes were ablaze with fury as he approached the top of the once-magnificent marble staircase – now blackened with soot and stray spells.

“They have broken the law, Dumbledore, and they must pay!” Umbridge shrieked as she began climbing the stairs towards him, her wand quivering in her stubby hands. “And if you wish to share their sentence –”

“I will do no such thing,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes abruptly icy, his gaze freezing Umbridge halfway up the stairs, “and it is not me who has broken the law, Miss Umbridge, it’s you.”

“I was doing what was necessary to bring a despicable criminal to justice!”

“You abused my trust, my patience, and the privileges given to teachers at this school,” Dumbledore said, his voice echoing in the hall as he raised his own wand, the light a brilliant beacon in the smoke. “And I will tolerate your despicable and cowardly conduct no longer.”

“Arrest him!” Umbridge screamed, pointing not at Harry this time, but at Dumbledore. Several of the Aurors and Hit Wizards exchanged shocked glances, but Umbridge didn’t seem to care. “Arrest him or your jobs are forfeit!”

Turning back towards Dumbledore, Umbridge stabbed her wand upwards. “Incar –”

The fragment of the spell and a single step were all she got off. Dumbledore raised his own wand and with a single wordless swish and flick, yanked Umbridge off her feet. Another flick sent her flying

straight into the heavy doors, which creaked with the weight of the impact.

“To all members of H.A.I.T. and any members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” Dumbledore began, his voice ringing in the near-silent hall, “I give you this message to take back to your superiors – Lord Voldemort has returned, he is on the move, and I will not tolerate any more attempts to subvert my authority at Hogwarts. Any of you who wish to stay and fight the greatest threat that our world has seen in years, you may stay. Any of you who are still undecided, please make your decisions while you still have the freedom to make them. The rest of you...” Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed as they focused on Umbridge. “Leave Hogwarts - now.”

Several seconds passed in total silence.

Then with a suddenness that nearly made Harry jump, pandemonium erupted in the hall. Nearly everyone in the hall fled for the massive oaken doors, many grabbing stretchers on their way out, and in just over twenty seconds, the hall was abandoned, but for the single figure standing in the hall. He had not moved a muscle all throughout Dumbledore’s speech, and he still had not removed his hood.

Dumbledore looked across the hall at the massive doors and the night beyond them before closing them with a wave of his wand. Finally, he turned to meet Harry’s eyes.

“I’m sorry it came to this, Harry.”

“I’m not,” Harry replied defiantly. “We won, didn’t we? We got Umbridge out of the school, and H.A.I.T. with it.”

“The only thing we need is a Defense teacher,” Fred said brightly, “and I’m sure you’ve got somebody in mind.”

A small smile crept across Dumbledore’s face as he turned towards the cloaked figure limping up the stairs. In a flash, Harry recognized the man. No wonder he knows the word to deactivate the fireworks... he’s an incredible wizard as it is...

“So, Alastor, are you up to returning to your old job?”

“The job I spent in my trunk without a paycheck?” Mad-Eye Moody growled, pulling his hood back to reveal a grimly triumphant expression on his scarred face. “Might as well – you need someone to train these lads into something decent. Though, from what I saw of the people they hauled out, it’s not these ones that need the training.”

“They’ll need all the training they can get, Alastor,” Dumbledore said quietly. “And not just for this new conflict – Voldemort is on the move, and his opening move was made tonight.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat. “You know it wasn’t me, Professor —”

“I do, Harry,” Dumbledore replied seriously. “Fred, George, please head back to Gryffindor Tower – I must speak with Harry and Professor Moody for a few minutes.”

“Then what was it?” Harry asked the second the twins were gone, swallowing hard despite himself.

“Something I have never seen before in my long life,” Dumbledore said grimly. “And that is what worries me.”

“Dark magic, Albus?” Moody asked sharply. “Death Eaters in Hogwarts? Something worse?”

“The last, and unlike anything I’ve ever seen before,” Dumbledore replied, “and I will need all of your investigative skills to find answers and solve this case.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry. “Although we won’t be working alone this time.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing – what Dumbledore was implying.

“You... you mean –”

“Yes, Harry,” Dumbledore said gravely. “There is little point in delaying any further, and our time is limited. Your training, and this investigation, begins now – and this time, you will not be alone.”

Dumbledore's expression was pensive as he looked at Harry, who was breathing very quickly as they stood in the bloodstained room.

"I've never seen magic worked in this manner before," Dumbledore murmured, his gaze moving to trace the walls and the bleeding letters hanging in the air, their enlargement halted by a muttered spell. "Although there are clues here that we might be able to utilize."

Harry's breath hitched. "Clues? It's a pretty damning indictment –"

"These words were formed with blood, Harry, and that narrows our field of magic considerably. Admittedly, not all blood-related magic is dark, but much of it is, and it concerns me greatly that four Ravenclaw girls would be involved in it." Dumbledore raised his wand and with another word, the letters flickered turquoise for a moment before fading back to their gristly red shade. "Yes, this is very curious indeed..."

"What's so curious?"

"The fact that the blood not only matches that of those four girls, but that it was drawn by their own hand – a worrisome sign, but we cannot rule out the Imperius Curse," Dumbledore replied, his eyes narrowing in concentration as he waved his wand again, this time at the bloodstains on the walls, which flickered green before returning to their original shade. "That blood, on the other hand, was not drawn from or by any of those girls."

"So you're suggesting that someone else did this?" Harry asked hesitantly, swallowing hard as he cautiously stepped around the circular stains spreading on the floor. "If that's true, why would they leave blood on the walls, and why would the stains be travelling up instead of down?"

"A calling card," Dumbledore replied simply, "to use a Muggle phrase. What left those bloodstains did so intentionally, to make its presence known – which makes me suspect that this message had a double meaning."

“Voldemort,” Harry growled, both of his fists tightly clenched. “He did this – somehow.”

“That is my suspicion,” Dumbledore agreed, raising his wand again. The room suddenly glowed with white light as the Headmaster traced symbols in the air, which burned vividly in the starkly lit room. “He intended both to slander you and to send a message – and it appears indeed that Lord Voldemort has an ulterior motive in his pursuit of you.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

“He is attacking innocents, knowing it will provoke you into dangerous action,” Dumbledore said grimly. “It is a tactic he has used before, and it is a terrible one.”

“We can’t just let him do this!” Harry exclaimed, running a hand through his hair as he began to pace. “I mean, how could he have even done this?”

“Acting through agents,” Dumbledore replied, dispelling the white light with a wave. The symbols he had drawn in the air turned bright silver, and Dumbledore nodded with satisfaction. “There are Death Eaters in the school.”

“Three of them,” Harry muttered.

Dumbledore froze, and turned quickly towards Harry, his blue eyes widening. “Three, you say?”

Harry cursed himself under his breath – he had not intended to let Peeves’ insane warning slip, much less that he had believed it. “Yeah.”

“That explains Miss Tonks’ report,” Dumbledore said, more to himself than to Harry, “and she got the tip from you?”

“Yes,” Harry replied curtly.

“And who told you that there are three Death Eaters here?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes narrowing. “And why didn’t you tell me?”

“You let Snape teach here,” Harry spat, “and I figured if there were Death Eaters in Hogwarts, you’d be aware of it. And you and I both know we haven’t been on the best of terms.”

“Terms we will not be on if we are not honest with each other,” Dumbledore replied, a note of sincere disappointment in his voice. “And before you even ask, Harry, it is not my place, nor do I possess the knowledge, to explain the issue regarding the Potter Vaults to you.”

“Of course,” Harry said through gritted teeth. “Professor, if it means anything, Peeves told me.”

That answer seemed to surprise Dumbledore, and Harry could see the old man’s eyebrows shoot into his long hair for a brief second before narrowing again contemplatively.

“Peeves, you say?”

“Yeah, Peeves,” Harry replied defensively. “Haven’t you noticed the damn poltergeist is acting odd?”

“As a matter of fact, Peeves has been extraordinarily quiet this year, according to Mr. Filch,” Dumbledore replied with a frown. “Perhaps the most quiet he has ever been. Needless to say, Mr. Filch was both elated and suspicious of the poltergeist’s absence.”

“Every time I’ve seen him, he’s been acting bizarre – darker than I’ve ever seen him,” Harry said, swallowing hard. “And... and he was the one that led me here in the first place! Professor, could Voldemort be doing something through Peeves? Could the poltergeist have done this?”

“Ghosts cannot cast spells, Harry, and their power in Hogwarts is limited,” Dumbledore replied, scratching his beard as he turned back

towards the bloody letters with interest. "Peeves could not have cast a spell to create this, and neither could Lord Voldemort –"

"But I remember Percy saying back in our first year that Peeves wasn't really a ghost anyways – isn't there a difference between poltergeists and regular spirits?"

"There are several, Harry, and many not easily observed," Dumbledore replied, carefully examining the runes still burning in the air with great interest. "A poltergeist shares much in common with a ghost in terms of basic composition, but they vary widely from that point onwards. Where a poltergeist gains unprecedented freedom to manipulate physical objects, they cannot use magic of any means, nor can leave the place where they were bound – in Peeves' case, Hogwarts. Furthermore, Peeves has been further restrained within Hogwarts, given the presence of students – namely that he cannot kill or cause serious, life-threatening injuries to any students or legitimate teachers."

"The Peeves that I saw seemed plenty capable of murder," Harry replied darkly. "Isn't there a way you can, I dunno, summon him or something so we can find out what we know from him? I mean, I'm sure there's a way we can compel him to tell us the truth – he told us when Sirius broke into the castle –"

"Only to incite more chaos," Dumbledore murmured, tapping the runes floating in the air with a frown. A second later, their light faded, leaving nothing but grayish, smoky symbols hanging in the air, which Dumbledore examined closely. "Now this is most intriguing."

"I never took Ancient Runes, but I don't think they should have gone dark like that," Harry said cautiously, moving for a closer look.

"Correct, Harry, they should not have, and that they have proves most worrying," Dumbledore replied, Vanishing the symbols with another wave of his wand. "The colour suggests that the actions here were committed by the same entity – both the bloodstains and the words."

“But the last spells that you cast said that was impossible!” Harry protested.

“Not exactly, no.” Dumbledore answered, his frown deepening. “Although this is most certainly very Dark magic.”

“Hell, I could have told you that,” Harry muttered.

“It could be one of several things, and that worries me immensely,” Dumbledore continued, his expression grave. “Worst of all, it could be something created by Lord Voldemort himself that I have never seen before – and for which there may be no counter.”

Harry took a deep breath as he looked at the bleeding letters for a few seconds. “Can you get rid of all of this...?”

“I will require Professor Snape’s assistance, but I should be able to get rid of the message,” Dumbledore replied, turning back towards the words.

“Good luck with that,” a new, gravelly voice said from the doorway. Harry heard the audible clunk of a wooden leg, and Harry knew that Moody had already drawn his wand.

“You could not contact him?” Dumbledore asked grimly.

“Damned Death Eater dropped off the face of the earth,” Moody growled, taking in the grisly room with a clinical expression. “Again. He’s getting as unreliable as Sturgis Podmore, he is. Any luck with this?”

“I have a number of leads I want to investigate. Did you have any luck with those girls?” There was a definite note of concern in Dumbledore’s voice, along with something that Harry couldn’t quite catch.

Moody closed his mismatched eyes, and for a brief second, Harry saw a flash of weariness cross the old Auror’s face, as if his job had taken too much out of him. “Only one’s even slightly responsive. The

other three..." His voice trailed off and Harry felt a sick feeling well up in his gut.

"What happened to the other three?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Moody looked at Harry. "The diagnosis... isn't promising. Madam Pomfrey's still working on it, but..."

Harry felt sick. "How... how bad is it?"

Moody didn't respond. He only looked at Dumbledore, whose eyes had grown very hard very quickly, as if he was hiding something beneath –

"You have still not managed to contact Severus?"

"Snape's a lying bastard, and almost certainly one of the three Death Eaters at Hogwarts," Harry spat. "For damn good riddance he's gone –"

"I'd be inclined to agree with you, Potter, but Snape's knowledge would be useful right about now," Moody cut him off curtly, crossing his arms over his chest. "The girl who's responsive isn't cooperating with us, and I'd be tempted to use Legilimency on her, but –"

"You know that doing that could be disastrous," Dumbledore finished, his expression grave as he slid his wand away. "You don't know what safeguards have been left in her brain that could shatter her sanity completely."

"And she refuses to even speak to me, and it's not like I'm going to be using Veritaserum any time soon, considering Snape's not providing and my leftover stockpile was in Headquarters," Moody growled with frustration, his magical eye spinning wildly in his head. "We need her memory of what happened here."

"What girl is it?" Harry asked quickly. "Is it Cho Chang?"

“Potter, it’s one of the older ones, and that’s all I can really tell you,” Moody replied warily. “It’s not like I was teaching last year and I would know.”

“Let me talk to her,” Harry said, thinking fast, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. “I might be able to get through to her.”

“And what makes you think you can do that?” Moody asked suspiciously.

“Cho and I... well, there’s a bit of history there, and maybe I can say something that might get through,” Harry replied, desperately searching for ideas. “We were friends of a sort, and if you need a memory from her, maybe I can help.”

“Harry, she’ll have to give up the memory willingly,” Dumbledore said slowly. “And coercing it from her will not be easy, particularly of such a traumatic event.”

“Who said anything about coercing?” Harry snapped. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Potter, she’s uncooperative,” Moody said flatly.

“She was probably scared of you,” Harry retorted, heading towards the door, leaving the grisly scene behind her.

“And if she thinks you were behind the attack on her, do you think she’d be more cooperative with you?” Moody snorted with disgust. “Think, Potter.”

“Then I’ll clear the air,” Harry replied, his voice low and difficult to hear as he left the room and began heading down the darkened hall on the long path towards the Hospital Wing. “For once, I’m actually innocent.”

* * *

“He’s not going to make any headway with that girl if he goes in wand blazing,” Moody muttered. “I thought you taught him to be subtle, Dumbledore.”

“I did, Alastor, although he does not know it – perhaps too subtle, even,” Dumbledore replied softly, his blue eyes taking on a steely appearance as they traced the walls of the room. “Thankfully, Harry is still untrained in Legilimency –”

“Definitely a double-edged sword, that skill,” Moody said with a grimace. “From the looks of things, he’s got a good grounding in combat, though –”

“Your protégé was most likely responsible for that.”

“If that was all she was responsible for, I’d be happy with her progress,” Moody growled. “Starting to regret your ‘hands-off’ policy on Potter, yet?”

“Why should I? He’s progressing far better than even I expected. Somehow, he managed to convince Castellan Zabini to support him, along with Nathan Cassane – two feats that even I would have had difficulty doing without resorting to dire measures –”

“Which Potter did do,” Moody interrupted. “I saw them bringing that bastard Kemester out on a stretcher – and he wasn’t moving. I’m not assuming he’s going to be moving ever again, and you know what that implies. And you saw the little light show surrounding the castle on the night Potter went on his mission.”

“That was less of an intended magical spell, I think, and more of a coincidental effect,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully, raising his wand again with a frown. “And the magic is indicating that the blood was drawn by the same entity – but by both the girls and by something... else.”

“Possession,” Moody said immediately. “Voldemort’s used that tactic before –”

“But that would imply that Voldemort’s in the school, and all our sources say he’s not...”

“Except for the tiny little coincidence that Snape’s not here either,” Moody pointed out, his voice ominous as his mismatched eyes moved faster and faster, his gaze zooming around the room. “Voldemort could well be here –”

“Except for the tiny little fact that four girls, under your hypothesis, would have been possessed to some degree,” Dumbledore finished, his frown deepening. “A feat of which even Voldemort is incapable.”

“That we know of,” Moody growled. “Snape’s absence is no coincidence, Dumbledore – he was ordered not to be here.”

“Regardless of Severus’ ability to provide us with reliable information, the fact remains that even Voldemort would be incapable of utilizing broken pieces of his consciousness simultaneously,” Dumbledore replied, moving towards the tiny window, his tone measured and guarded as he looked out the window. “Furthermore, our intelligence suggests that only he is able to possess human beings at this time – none of his Death Eaters, even his most capable, can accomplish this feat. Finally – and this is just a guess – this attack does not seem to be Voldemort’s style.”

“What, you don’t think he would stoop this low?” Moody’s voice was incredulous.

“While Lord Voldemort is a master of psychological warfare, he does not grasp certain subtleties of human behavior – most specifically, friendship,” Dumbledore murmured, his long fingers carefully tracing symbols in the fogging glass that Moody didn’t recognize. “A much stronger message would have been to attack Harry’s friends – not four girls he barely knows.”

“So instead of being a committed sociopath, he’s a bloody terrorist who doesn’t care who he hits as long as it sends a message!” Moody snarled, banging his scarred fist on the table. “We’re lucky those girls

weren't magically raped and that the attack was only made to look like it!"

"That only proves supports my hypothesis, Alastor," Dumbledore said firmly, turning away from the window, his eyes flashing with barely controlled anger. The old Auror stepped back at the terrible look on Dumbledore's face, and he knew that Voldemort had indeed crossed a line by utilizing such tactics if he had been responsible. "Voldemort does not understand the effectiveness of sexual attacks, and if Severus' reports are correct –"

"A big 'if', there," Moody muttered.

" – then Voldemort would not have attempted such an attack, simply because it would never have occurred to him. To Bellatrix Lestrange, or Evan Rosier, or Damian Mulciber, perhaps, but not to Lord Voldemort."

"You seem awfully certain of that," Moody replied suspiciously. "What if you're wrong, or misinformed? Snape doesn't exactly have a sterling record."

"Perhaps not, but his information has been reliable," Dumbledore replied, his voice iron as he completed a symbol with a single twist of a long finger. To Moody's surprise, the symbol gleamed golden for a few seconds before fading. "And this confirms my suspicion – the elements of the magic that protects Hogwarts from hostile spiritual attack have remained intact. Voldemort has not penetrated the school since before the beginning of the term."

"I assume you're ignoring Snape and the would-be Death Eaters in Slytherin in that analysis," Moody replied bitingly.

"It requires a phenomenal amount of energy and effort for Voldemort to possess any human in any way," Dumbledore countered, "and if my research is correct, it puts his new mortal body in great peril if there isn't already a stable connection present – a connection nonexistent in these girls –"

“But present in one individual,” Moody said sharply, his voice gravelly. “Dumbledore, we can’t overlook the possibility here, the water under the bridge.”

“I am certain that is not the case.”

“Dumbledore, we know the connection is there, even if we don’t understand it!” Moody snarled, his patience already out. “All I’m saying is, what if Potter is —”

The door opened, and Moody’s wand was already up and pointing at it with surprising speed. Dumbledore only sighed.

“I’m glad to see you’ve made somewhat of a recovery, Minerva.”

Professor McGonagall huffed. “None of H.A.I.T. – with the exception of Umbridge – was aiming to kill, so I’m quite all right. I can’t say the same for those four girls in the Hospital Wing, though.”

“Madam Pomfrey’s made no progress?” Dumbledore asked.

“I didn’t want to say it while Potter was in the room, Dumbledore, but it’s not likely she’s going to make any progress,” Moody replied roughly. “Whatever made them try this certainly didn’t have a clean exit.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed.

“I’ll write the letters to their parents —” McGonagall began.

“Minerva, I will handle that,” Dumbledore cut her off. “Is there any news of Professor Snape?”

“None, but I do have news, and neither of you will like it,” McGonagall finished grimly. “We have a nasty situation regarding H.A.I.T.”

“Did they leave something behind?” Moody asked sharply.

“Yes.”

Moody swore under his breath, while Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. “Some sort of safeguard, or Portkey?”

“ Neither,” McGonagall replied curtly. “They left behind two members.”

* * *

For the sixth time that night, Larshall cursed Dolores Umbridge and her terrible contingency plan, even as he wiped away the thick sheen of sweat coating his head.

“So much for a bloody evacuation plan!” he exploded, slamming his fist against the table that he had shoved in front of the door of the deserted classroom he and Sanders had hidden in. “We should have been informed, damn it! This is a disaster!”

“ It’s Umbridge’s fault, not ours, so just keep quiet, will you?” Sanders snapped, adding a chair to the pile of furniture stacked against the door. “The last thing we need is to be found in here, and even though this school is big, it won’t be long, especially if Dumbledore’s leading the search.”

“And of all the people that she left behind, it just had to be us two!” Larshall finished furiously. “The two that are heading up vital investigations!”

“Yeah, you know it’s because of those investigations that we’re still here, you know,” Sanders replied with a snort as he pulled out another chair and stacked it roughly against the door. “Talk about irony.”

“Don’t make that pile too high; we’re still going to have to get out of here –”

Sanders snorted. "Think for a second here, Reed, what do you think the Floo Network is for?" Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a tiny bag and tossed it to the other Hit Wizard. "Make the call to the Ministry first for orders – we'll only have a few minutes until that damned bitch McGonagall gets back with Dumbledore."

"I know the procedures as well as you do, if not better," Larshall shot back, tossing a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. Taking a deep breath and trying to calm his quaking stomach, he stuck his head into the fire.

"Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones' office!"

He could feel the grates roaring past his ears, and suddenly –

"Action must be taken immediately, Amelia! If Dumbledore is already mobilizing his army –"

"For the last time, Cornelius, we don't have an iota of proof that Dumbledore even has an army!" Amelia Bones replied sharply, a definite note of anger in her voice. "And by law, I cannot authorize the full deployment of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement without giving Dumbledore a chance to show his case –"

"He evicted me, H.A.I.T., and a large complement of sanctioned Ministry wizards without authority!" Dolores Umbridge exclaimed, her toad-like face livid as her high shrill voice cut through the din. "He's a traitor –"

"Traitor to whom, Dolores?" Rufus Scrimgeour snapped. "By the report I was given from one of my Aurors, your conduct was beyond bounds, and if half the information I've heard is true, the Ministry will have another inquiry on its hands –"

"You have no litigation to make those kinds of accusations, Rufus!" Cornelius Fudge shouted. "Dumbledore's actions have made his intentions clear –"

Larshall loudly cleared his throat, but nobody even heard the noise through the argument.

“We have to follow the dictates of law if we want to have this dealt with in a way that won’t rip the Ministry apart!” Scrimgeour snarled. “And with Cassane – who just happens to be one of the most powerful wizards in the world, not to mention the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards – deciding to breathe down all our necks for his own depraved amusement, our actions are under tighter scrutiny than ever. Make no mistake, the foreign press will be here in minutes once something leaks out –”

Fudge harrumphed. “The Prophet has been under control –”

“Cornelius, I’m not talking about the damned Prophet, I’m talking about the French, German, Russian, and the Merlin-cursed American journalists who are going to hear about this story!” Scrimgeour snapped, and Larshall could see the Head of the Auror Department barely controlling his formidable temper. “Dumbledore was a wizard known on the international stage, and if he really has set himself against the Ministry, people are going to ask why.”

Fudge went red. “I’ll issue a press statement –”

“Cuffe’s already on his way to hear your exclusive interview –”

“Won’t be enough, Umbridge, and you know it,” Bones added curtly. “Minister, the foreign press is fickle at best, and vindictive at the worst. Some will go straight to Dumbledore –”

“We’ll cut off his communications!” Fudge shouted, his face now a glowing shade of crimson.

Larshall could barely restrain a snort. “Good luck with that.”

The room fell suddenly silent, and Larshall felt the gaze of his superiors and the Minister upon him. He swallowed hard – it looked like Fudge was ready to kill something, and his head was in a very bad position.

“Hit Wizard Larshall, why are you interrupting our meeting?” Scrimgeour said, his tone dangerously brittle.

“Sanders and I are still at Hogwarts, sir, and we need orders,” Larshall said in a rush, blurting out the words, knowing that he had already lost precious seconds. “Do you want us still at Hogwarts, or do you want out or –”

“Why didn’t you leave with the rest of them, you –”

“Rufus, he’s in my Department, I’ll deal with this,” Bones cut Scrimgeour off, even though the Head Auror looked ready to explode. Well, from what I heard of his argument with Fudge, I can’t really blame him, Larshall thought uneasily as he looked at the Minister for Magic.

“Both Sanders and I were on investigation at the time, and we didn’t know H.A.I.T. was evacuating until McGonagall found us and tried to bring us to Dumbledore. It’s a bloody miracle we got out of there –”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Fudge exclaimed impatiently. “Get out of there! The last thing we need is a hostage situation –”

“Hold a second, Cornelius, we might be able to salvage this,” Scrimgeour said quickly, moving closer to the fire. “Is there a way that you might be able to speak with Dumbledore?”

“I’m going to get caught by Dumbledore in a few minutes, so I guess so!” Larshall replied heatedly.

“Tell him we want to start negotiations,” Bones added, pulling a sheaf of parchment from her briefcase and scribbling frantically. “We can’t let this get out of England, and Dumbledore’s always open to reason –”

But Fudge snatched the parchment out from underneath Bones’ quill and, with a loud rip, tore it in half.

“Cornelius, have you lost your mind?”

“Minister, listen to reason –”

“One does not listen to the reasoning from the mouth of a devil!” Fudge snarled. “One shuts his ears and pushes away the corruption inherent in his words! Dumbledore’s been able to talk his way out of too many of these debacles, and I won’t stand for it any longer! I am the Minister for Magic, and the leader of the witches and wizards of our nation – not Dumbledore! His loyalties have been set, and I will not tolerate his treachery!”

“Well said,” Umbridge said, a small grin creeping onto her face. “I’ll call Cuffe immediately.”

“Contact my press secretaries next, we need to prepare a statement to the foreign press,” Fudge continued briskly, his eyes filled with a dangerous light. “Then send an owl to Cassane with all haste – we’ll need him and his power now more than ever.”

“Minister –”

“Madam Bones, the negotiation is past, and our days of protecting and avoiding confrontation with Dumbledore are over,” Fudge snapped. “If you won’t abide by Ministry policy, I will ask you to clean out your desk.”

Bones rose to her feet, her eyes narrowed. “I might just –”

“Sit down, Amelia,” Scrimgeour growled, sending her a pointed look. “It’s too late for this.”

“Well said, Rufus,” Fudge said with an approving nod. “Now, if you’d excuse me, I must inform the Department of Magical Law that they have a whole new section of books to examine. Madam Bones, Rufus – mobilize the Department.”

And with a supremely confident sniff, the Minister strode out of the office, Umbridge at his heels.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Bones swore an uncharacteristically vile oath under her breath and began scribbling madly. “Fudge has lost his mind,” she muttered, her quill skidding across the paper. “Absolutely bloody lost his mind... he’s going to destroy the Ministry with this madness –”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Scrimgeour replied, and Larshall could tell that the Auror was thinking faster than he had ever in his life. “Cassane will never condone a war without even an attempt at negotiations –”

“Wait, you want me to negotiate with Dumbledore –” Larshall began.

“Cassane won’t give a damn about this plan!” Bones said furiously, her signature a furious scrawl on the paper. “He’s never cared before, so why should he care now?”

“Because he knows the stakes are higher than ever right now, and he’s currently the only one with anywhere close to Dumbledore’s political power,” Scrimgeour replied, adding his signature to the paper and rolling it tightly into a scroll, his hands moving with a calm deftness born of extreme pressure. “And unless you believe Dumbledore’s call that the great Lord Voldemort is back –”

“I believe it more and more every day,” Bones muttered.

“You want me to negotiate on your behalf?” Larshall exclaimed. “I’m not qualified –”

“Since when has that stopped people?” Scrimgeour spat. “Take a bloody look at our fair Minister! Now put your bloody hand in the fire to take this damned paper, we’ve wasted too much time already!”

For an agonizing second, Larshall felt his hand flying through grate after grate until it finally poked out of the fireplace, taking the scroll in trembling fingers.

“Just be thankful you’ve got Sanders with you,” Scrimgeour added grimly, “instead of Kemester – at least you’ll have a chance.”

“But I –”

Agonizing pain rocked his body, and he felt himself yanked backwards, through a while of green flames and grates...

There was a bang, as if he had crashed into a massive gong, and before he could regain his senses, Larshall found himself sprawled on the floor, looking up at the wands held by Professor McGonagall, Mad-Eye Moody, and Albus Dumbledore himself.

“That was not an intelligent thing to do, Mr. Larshall,” Moody growled, grabbing the Hit Wizard by his collar and yanking him up. “Who were you communicating with?”

“It was the Ministry!” Larshall yelled, panic taking over the second he met Moody’s mismatched eyes. “Bones and Scrimgeour – they want to parley!”

“An easy excuse,” Moody said darkly.

“But one that has the ring of truth to it,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes flashing. “What is their proposal?”

“I have it right here –”

Except Larshall’s hand was empty. The scroll was gone, torn from his hand in the Floo Network.

“I don’t see a proposal, Mr. Larshall,” McGonagall said icily.

“I had it!” Larshall gasped wildly, looking around frantically. He saw Sanders, pressed against the wall, Flitwick’s wand pointed at his back. “I... I must have lost it in the fire –”

“Of course you did,” Moody said with a disgusted snort. “And I trust you completely. Where should we take these two, Albus?”

“Hogwarts does not have prison cells, Alastor,” Dumbledore replied. “Take him and Mr. Sanders to the dungeons – Professor Snape and I will interrogate them there when he returns.”

“I swear, I’m telling the truth!” Larshall shouted, his eyes widening as Moody yanked him up with a sharp wave of his wand. The Hit Wizard scrabbled for his wand – only for it to fly from his hands with a crisp spell from McGonagall.

“Telling the truth while going for your wand isn’t entirely intelligent, Larshall,” Moody snapped, pocketing Larshall’s wand with a scowl. “And recently, I’ve found it difficult to trust the words of a Hit Wizard.”

The old ex-Auror turned to Dumbledore, giving him a pointed, disgusted gaze. “Or Death Eaters.”

* * *

The Hospital Wing looked as scrupulously clean as always, but Harry didn’t notice it this time. He noticed that the white marble seemed too bright, the stone sinisterly muted, the moon suspiciously gone. He noticed the shadows cast by long curtains hung over beds – four beds precisely. He swallowed hard, despite himself. He could hear a faint rustling and squeaking sound coming from the beds, and he wondered for a second what was causing it.

“Mr. Potter, what are you doing here?” Madam Pomfrey asked suddenly, nearly dropping the potion in her hand as she emerged from her storage cupboard.

“I... I’ve come to see Ron,” Harry quickly lied, looking around at the beds. “Is he here?”

“You mean for his eyes?” Madam Pomfrey gave a forced laugh. “I fixed that in about a minute, Potter.” But Harry saw her look at the

beds, and there was something desperate in the white-knuckled grip around the potion bottle...

“So he’s back in Gryffindor Tower?”

“I would assume so, yes, so off to bed, then.” Madam Pomfrey’s tone was very quick, and Harry saw her steal another glance at the curtained beds. “On your way, please.”

“That’s not the only reason why I’m here, though.”

“There’s nothing to see here,” Madam Pomfrey said hurriedly, giving the beds another look as her hands trembled. “Those girls will make a complete recovery, yes, I’m sure of it –”

“Madam Pomfrey, I saw them... and I heard what Dumbledore said.” Harry swallowed hard. “Please don’t lie to me or make this difficult –”

“Did Dumbledore say you could see them?” Madam Pomfrey asked suddenly.

“He said I could talk to them – actually, I volunteered to try,” Harry replied with another swallow, and he could feel the bile in his throat. “I – I want to see if I can through to the one who’s still... still...”

Madam Pomfrey understood, and Harry watched the blood drain from her face.

“You’re sure Dumbledore would condone this?”

“We need answers, Madam Pomfrey, and any lead would be better than none at all.” Harry’s fist clenched tightly. “Please – we need to stop this... look, whatever this is, we need to stop it before it happens again.”

Their eyes met for a long few seconds, and finally Madam Pomfrey took a shuddering breath.

“The bed on the end, Mr. Potter. Do not cast any magic on her, please – the last thing we need is a side-effect none of us have seen before destroying her sanity forever.”

Harry closed his eyes, and holding back a surge of rage at the bastards who had done this to get to him, he pulled open the curtains, expecting to see Cho lying on the bed.

He had been wrong. It wasn't Cho – and she certainly wasn't 'lying' on the bed.

Su Li had been strapped to the bed, almost brutally. Her long black hair was wildly tousled around her head, even as she thrashed feebly against the pillow. Some sort of vice held her throat pinned to the mattress, and to Harry's horror, he could see that she had been placed in some sort of straitjacket that had been built into the bed itself! Even her legs had been tightly strapped down. Yet despite the restraints, Su was still fighting to free herself, and the sheets rustled and the bed creaked as she tried to pull herself free. Yet all the while, she didn't even scream or make a noise – not a word was escaping her lips.

Harry felt a wave of sick revulsion surge up in his stomach. “What did you do to her?”

“We had no choice,” Madam Pomfrey replied sadly. “The other girls are worse – I was only bringing a sedative to her when you arrived.”

“But why is she strapped down like this?” Harry asked, fury filling his voice. “This is wrong!”

“Before she was, she was trying to claw out her own eyes and reopen the wounds on her wrists,” Madam Pomfrey replied with a slight shiver as she emptied the remainder of the sedative bottle into a small cup. “The other girls... it was worse. At least poor Su has some sanity left...”

And indeed, as Harry took a closer look, Harry could see the flicker of cool intellect in Su's eyes – there was at least something left after all. And that means she might remember...

He moved closer and looked at the girl. "Su, do you know who I am?"

She stopped thrashing suddenly, and her eyes narrowed in suspicion and outright hostility.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, trying to pull some gentleness and compassion into his voice as he looked into the girl's dark eyes. "You know me, right?"

She stared at him for a long few seconds before giving him a short, curt nod.

Harry breathed a little easier. "You see, I'm making progress already. Can we get some of these restraints off of her, at least?"

"Harry, they're there for her safety –"

"And they're making her more hostile than ever! No wonder Professor Moody couldn't get anything from her!" Sitting on the edge of her bed, he carefully undid the latch of the neck vice, so she could at least free her head.

Immediately, the girl attempted to sit upright, but with a snap, the straitjacket pulled her back to the bed, pressing her against the mattress. Harry threw a glare at Madam Pomfrey, but she only shook her head and walked away.

"Merlin only knows where they got these beds anyways," Harry muttered. "This is just wrong. Anyways, Su, I need your help."

Her eyes were hostile, and Harry could see himself reflected back in their icy, mirror-like surfaces. She did not speak a word – her lips were shut.

After a few seconds, Harry frowned. “Aren’t you going to say something?”

The disdainful expression on her face pretty much answered that question, and Harry could feel his patience beginning to ebb.

“You know I’m trying to help you, right?”

The expression that met his was not one of disdain this time, but one of disgust. The kind of look that accompanied the words ‘you have no fucking idea what you’re facing.’ Harry couldn’t see Su saying those words, but the look certainly conveyed the idea.

“Look, I’m trying to find out what happened to you and the other girls – can you tell me what happened to you? Do you remember?”

Su seemed to relax, and Harry began to breathe a little easier – maybe he was going to get an answer –

It happened suddenly, and Harry was knocked off the bed. Reeling from the impact, he looked up to see Su sitting as upright as the restraints would allow, her eyes impossibly wide, her mouth open in a silent scream, blood spilling from her ears. Dark stains were erupting across her straitjacket –

Harry scrambled to his feet, his eyes wide with horror as Su’s head twisted sickeningly towards him, jerkily, as if she had no control of her muscles at all...

A single sound escaped her lips, from deep in her throat, as if she was exerting every bit of effort to claw the word from her mouth –

And without another word, she collapsed back on the bed. The neck vice snapped again around her throat, holding her in place, and the blood trickling down her face slowed... before vanishing entirely. The bloodstains in the straitjacket remained though – a damning indictment, a diabolic malediction...

The silence was deafening in the Hospital Wing, as Harry put a hand to his head, the word burned into his memory as if by a branding iron.

“Mr. Potter, are you okay? Mr. Potter, respond!”

He waved off Madam Pomfrey as he moved towards the door, his feet listless, his expression blank. Like it or not, he would not forget the name that she had given him, the only clue he had.

“Stoker,” he whispered to himself. “The word is... stoker.”

* * *

Lord Voldemort's red eyes narrowed as they met the dark eyes of Severus Snape.

“Are you absolutely certain of this, Snape?”

“The first stage of Nott's plan appears to have been a success,” Snape replied, his voice rough beneath his mask. “And the smear attempt seems to have had a rather... unexpected result.”

“H.A.I.T. has been evicted from Hogwarts,” the Dark Lord hissed. It was a statement, not a question.

“Nott has confirmed it.”

“Who has Dumbledore brought to his side?”

“My suspicion would be either Kingsley Shacklebolt or Alastor Moody, but given current circumstances, his likeliest candidate is Moody.”

“And the Ministry?” the Dark Lord asked, turning to another Death Eater, with a newly crafted mask and very clean black robes.

“I was there,” the man replied, his smooth tones easily filling the shadowed room. “Fudge has mobilized the Department of Magical

Law Enforcement. It will take some time to bring the entire department together from their various assignments, but it has already begun.”

“Can I rely on your information, Wilson?” the Dark Lord growled.

“If you can give me what I want, I’m at your service,” Rogan Wilson replied, his eyes gleaming with long-concealed greed and lust. “That’s how these deals work, don’t they?”

If only you knew, Snape thought bitterly.

“Of course,” the Dark Lord replied, a lipless grin crawling onto his face as he turned to face a third masked figure in the circle. This figure clutched a silver cane, and his bow was nearly broken by a stumble and a gasp of pain.

“Forgive me... that I do not kneel, my lord,” Lucius Malfoy whispered, every word filled with pain.

“It has not healed?” the Dark Lord’s voice was abruptly cold.

“Parts have healed, but others...” Malfoy did not remove his mask, but Snape suspected the older man was flushed with shame. “I will not be able to bear another son to serve you, my lord.”

There were hints of mocking laughter around the circle, but the Dark Lord silenced them with a stare. He looked around the circle, an expression of satisfaction on his face.

“My plans are succeeding, my friends, but we are moving into a critical stage, and I will not tolerate a lack of information. Snape, Wilson, I want reports on all developments, regardless of any perceived significance. My efforts with the giants have already been necessarily slowed, but I predict their arrival by the winter. Yaxley, have the Dementors replied to my offer?”

“Azkaban will be handed over to you on the eve of Yule,” Yaxley replied swiftly. “There will be resistance, as Dumbledore undoubtedly

has agents there, both in the prison and out of it, but I predict the transition to be smooth.”

“And the werewolves, Greyback?” the Dark Lord asked, his eyes landing on the only figure in the circle without a mask – and without a Dark Mark. He wore tattered and patched robes, and his face was bestial beneath his hood. “They will support us?”

“They want something tangible, my lord,” Greyback replied, his raspy voice savage as he inclined his head with a hint of a bow. “I need something to fulfill the promises we’ve made them – something bloody.”

“Of course,” the Dark Lord said smoothly. “That is why they’ll be the front line in the attack upon Azkaban. Anyone that I do not want is theirs.”

Greyback’s eyes gleamed with bloodlust at the promise. “Generous. Will it be a full moon?”

“I can ensure it will be,” the Dark Lord said, his lipless smile unfading. “Lucius, have you any word from your international contacts?”

“Not as of yet, my lord,” Malfoy replied immediately, “but I do have this.” He pulled a rather crumpled letter from his pocket and shakily extended it.

The Dark Lord took the paper and read it very slowly, scrutinizing every line. After several long minutes, he folded it carefully and gave Malfoy an icy look.

“Why did he contact you? Does he know?”

“Not about us, but he undoubtedly has some inkling of my... predicament. And he knows my power in this sector.”

“I expected him to hold you at arm’s length, considering his previous rejection to our promises.”

“Things must have changed – there is obvious desperation in his scrawl.”

“He’s not worth my effort to recruit, as I have said many times before,” the Dark Lord hissed, “but you have clearance to attempt your little scheme.”

“I will meet with him as soon as I can find him,” Malfoy said quickly, with another awkward bow.

“Check St. Mungo’s,” Wilson said with a grating laugh. “He’s undoubtedly in there right now. You can go when you go for your check-up on your deep-fried testicles.”

Malfoy’s wand was ripped free of his cane in a second, and pointing at the chuckling Auror, but the Dark Lord drove them both to their knees with a single, acrid glare.

“We do not have time for this pathetic behavior,” the Dark Lord growled. “Wilson, our deal can be eradicated in an instant, you realize this?”

“O-Of course.”

“Good. Now, all of you – get out of my sight.” The Dark Lord turned slowly, and Snape felt his heart pound in his chest the second his eyes met his master’s.

“Except for you.”

There was a series of loud pops, and before Snape could meet the Dark Lord’s eyes again, he was alone. No, that was wrong – he wasn’t alone. Someone was watching them... and chuckling.

“You’ve been hiding something from me, Snape,” the Dark Lord began dangerously, “and I want to know what it is. And I know it has something to do with Nott’s mission.”

Snape thought for a few seconds, contemplating his next move. He'll find out eventually, and I have nothing to lose by divulging this... "The night in which Nott, Malfoy, and Zabini activated their magic, my lord, something happened to Hogwarts. A magical effect surrounding the school unlike anything I've ever seen."

And he told the Dark Lord what he had seen that fateful night with Lupin. The Dark Lord's silence following his words scared Snape more than even he had expected.

"Interesting," the Dark Lord finally said, his voice flat.

"My lord, do you..."

"Know what caused this magic?" the Dark Lord asked with a grim expression. "It was a conjunction, Snape, something you would have never seen before, and this only lends credence to my own suspicions – and you have a new job to do."

"My lord, I –"

"Find out what foul magic was worked that night in Hogwarts that interfered with mine, and inform me immediately. Such conjunctions are dangerous in the extreme, and I have no desire to lose Hogwarts and its power to magic beyond my control." The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed. "And you know the price of failure, Snape."

"It will be done, my Lord," he whispered, closing his eyes against the expected curse.

But instead he heard footsteps – booted feet hitting the stone floor. Snape cautiously looked up, only to see another figure standing in the room, hooded and cloaked heavily. He wore no mask, but the darkness shrouded the man's features. He looked vaguely familiar though...

The Dark Lord's smile was insidious. "Strange, I think, how some prophecies are so slow in their fulfillment... one can't even consider them prophecies. You don't recognize him, Snape?"

Snape frowned and looked closer at the figure. He was familiar... long black hair, a strong build, remnants of great good looks...

He froze, and took an involuntary step back, the icy grip of fear on his heart again as he met the man's wild eyes. Too dark, yet lit with an unearthly light that wasn't quite human...

"It's good to see you too, Snivellus," Sirius Black said pleasantly, his expression undeniably mad. "Of course, last time you came after me, you nearly died, so I'll be short with our introductions."

Snape struggled for words, but at the sight of Black's insane eyes, he could hardly bring together a coherent response.

"How...?"

"We all have our secrets, Snape," the Dark Lord said with a patient note in his voice, the same note held in a viper's hiss before it killed the rat. "Suffice to say, Mr. Black is now in my service, and I figured you should know."

"Also prevents me from killing you, but I figured you could deal with the fact that my reward in the end includes your death," Black added conversationally.

That's not Sirius Black, Snape thought frantically, the cold knot of fear sliding down his gut, even though all the evidence before his own eyes contradicted that statement. It... it just can't be him...

"And I have a task for you, Mr. Black, to add to Snape's little mission," the Dark Lord finished. "Two tasks, actually."

"Of course."

The Dark Lord's smile was filled with cold triumph as his livid red eyes met Black's. "Kill Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, Sirius. Kill your past, and kill your present... so all you have left is your future."

Fleur Delacour shifted uncomfortably in the worn wooden chair. Her wand twirled around her nervous fingers as she tried to compose herself in the cramped Diagon Alley restaurant. Her hood was thrown up, but she knew that would attract far less attention than her silvery hair and part-Veela heritage.

Or the fact that I'm going to be meeting with Harry Potter's legal counsel...

Despite herself, she swallowed hard. She didn't know why the meeting had been requested, the note scrawled in jagged, albeit feminine handwriting, as if the writer was quite competent with a quill, but couldn't quite use it properly...

It had been the crisp, professional words written on the paper that had convinced her of its truth. If anything, the writing had reminded her of Harry's messages – and like those, she was worried about what she was being asked to do.

It doesn't make any sense that Harry's lawyer wants to meet with me – if the Ministry had caught him, they would have plastered it all over the Prophet, and they haven't – yet, she thought uneasily. And I covered my tracks scrupulously with the Zabini audit...

But even after a few weeks of no questions, the doubt and worry that she had somehow made a mistake hadn't faded – if anything, it had gotten worse. And now he's snooping around, she thought uneasily, her free hand clenching into a small fist. Admittedly, he hasn't been asking me questions, but he could be trying to circumspectly search...

“Madam, would you like a coffee while you are waiting?”

“No, thank you,” Fleur replied curtly, trying to conceal as much of her French accent as possible. The last thing I need is to draw attention now. “Has my companion arrived yet?”

“She sent a message saying that she will be a few minutes late,” the waiter replied primly. The portly, mustachioed man had already

stopped trying to catch glimpses of her face – something she was very thankful for. “Would you care for a beverage of any kind?”

“Perhaps a glass of water would be best,” Fleur said carefully. Nothing alcoholic – after all, this is just lunch.

“Certainly.” The waiter sped off into the crowd, surprisingly large given the relatively early lunch hour. Carefully adjusting her skirt, Fleur took a few seconds to peer around the room. By now, she suspected that her watchers – at least the Ministry ones – had been withdrawn, but she suspected that the goblins weren’t nearly done with her yet. The little fiends hold grudges, and the breach of their security – and even my suspected involvement – will have them keeping an eye on me for a long time...

She didn’t think that she would be able to spot the goblin spy – she doubted the raucous, albeit well-dressed group in the far booth were involved, it was too obvious – but it didn’t hurt to look. She carefully scanned the room over the copy of the Prophet that she wasn’t reading. Most of the people in the restaurant were eating, laughing, playing cards, or arguing about something, and very few of them were sitting alone. Of course, Fleur knew that the best spies concealed themselves among their friends to throw off the obvious trail...

Her gaze paused, and her eyes narrowed, focusing on one of the few people who were sitting alone – a young, buxom blonde with gleaming eyes and a haughty demeanor. Fleur frowned – she’d seen that woman before, but when...

“Your water, madam.”

“Thank you,” Fleur replied, carefully taking the thin glass and turning back to her paper...

Only to see the blonde woman sitting across from her, a smirk on her rich full lips.

“Hello there, Miss Delacour.”

Fleur's breath caught in her throat, and her wand stopped spinning in her hand to point directly at the mysterious woman. "I do not believe I know you, so if you would excuse me..."

"Really?" the woman asked, raising her delicate eyebrows as her smile widened. "I would have thought our last, rather explosive encounter would have sealed the deal."

Now she recognized her. She didn't relax, though – she had heard enough to know that Death Eaters would attempt such tricks. And it's not like I have exactly a private profile...

"But I'm not actually here for you," the woman finished with a wink. "I'm here to speak as protection."

Fleur tried to conceal her surprise. "Pardon? Protection for who, exactly?"

"Well, do you really think someone like Harry Potter's legal counsel should go without protection?" the woman retorted. "Given the Ministry of Magic's... recent stance? Given your position, you should know this better than anybody."

Fleur stiffened. This woman was striking far too close to home, and the last thing Fleur needed was to get flustered and draw attention. She gritted her teeth and gripped her wand tighter as she glared at the smugly smiling woman.

"So I do not suppose, then, that you would know when Mr. Potter's legal counsel is coming?"

"My, so formal, you almost sound like a pureblood," the woman replied with a snort. "She should be here momentarily – ah, I think that's her now...."

Fleur automatically rose to her feet as the new arrival approached the table, quickly surveying every aspect of her appearance with a long, casual look. Attractive woman... young for a lawyer, but the Ministry's

hiring younger staff all the time these days. She's wearing business robes with more Muggle styling than is usually seen – she's fashionable, though, which is indeed interesting. I can only hope that she's actually intelligent...

"You must be Fleur Delacour," the lawyer began crisply, giving Fleur a curt nod before turning to the other woman at the table. "Nymphadora Vuneren, I must say that I'm a bit surprised to see you here."

"Just protecting the assets of the firm, if you know what I mean," Miss Vuneren replied innocently. "Miss Delacour, may I introduce you to Clarissa Desdame, the legal counsel currently employed by one Harry Potter."

"Charmed," Fleur replied, gritting her teeth. This Vuneren woman is a liar, or is at least concealing information. Desdame didn't expect her to be here, but it doesn't appear like she's not welcome...

"Right to business, I think," Desdame began shortly, pulling a few folders from her briefcase and setting them on the table after they had ordered drinks. "As you know, I'm currently representing Mr. Potter in his legal affairs."

"Yes," Fleur replied cautiously. Where is she going with this? And why am I involved? "I was under the impression, though, that he was cleared –"

"The decision made by the school governors was only that Potter's questioning was to be kept private and restricted within Hogwarts," Desdame interrupted, her gaze towards Vuneren before returning to Fleur. "That did not remove the charges, however – collaboration with Sirius Black, the murder of Ollivander, and the destruction of his shop within Diagon Alley, not to mention evasion of arrest and obstruction of justice."

"Unfortunately, given the tumult within the Wizengamot and the Ministry at the moment, the charges have yet to be officially made public," Vuneren added, her eyes glinting as she leaned closer. "The investigation was classified under the Hit Wizard Larshall, and when

he was captured at Hogwarts, his subordinates were left floundering, so to speak.”

“But that’s not going to last much longer, because the Minister’s campaign is two-pronged,” Desdame finished, her cold expression betraying more than a hint of disgust as she took the offered glass of water from the waiter. “He is planning a public press conference to appease the foreign journalists and the International Confederation of Wizards, and at that conference, he plans to attack both Dumbledore and Mr. Potter, and to do so, he plans to make Larshall’s investigation public. Follow me so far?”

“Wait a moment... would not a public investigation imply that there’s going to be oversight from somewhere?” Fleur asked with a frown. “Would not that be good for Harry, consider half those charges are absurd?”

“Typically, yes, but Fudge is playing a very tight game with the Wizengamot. While expanding the powers of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, he is also pushing legislation that will allow him to mobilize the Hit Wizards and Aurors as an army, with auxiliary forces drawn from other departments,” Vuneren said with a snort. “That won’t pass through the Wizengamot easily, considering lack of precedent and the few supporters of Dumbledore still within the court, but Fudge is confident he has Dumbledore in a position of weakness, bereft of political power and allies.”

Fleur could hardly restrain her noise of disgust. “That is insane. Surely Fudge doesn’t think he can restrain a wizard such as Dumbledore –”

“Why do you think he’s been sending people daily to the Chief Warlock’s personal residence, trying to get Cassane to intervene on the Ministry’s behalf?” Vuneren asked with a scowl. “Nathan Cassane might not be in the same league as Dumbledore in terms of magical power, but he would be a formidable ally.”

“And that’s not all the Minister is attempting to do,” Desdame continued, her eyes narrowed. “Given the magnitude of Dumbledore’s

power and influence, the Minister knows that if he truly wishes to have any vestige of control over the Headmaster of Hogwarts, he needs to restrict Dumbledore's flow of capital."

"And that means dealing with Gringotts," Fleur finished, setting her empty glass of water down with a hollow clink. "And with the Department of Magical Finance."

"The goblins are proving most obstinate in dealing with the Ministry, and it's not just because of the tightened security," Desdame said, a hint of a smile on her face as she shifted in her chair. "Many goblins have supported Dumbledore's push for reform, particularly in the goblin relations divisions."

"And it doesn't help that the goblins have control of more of the Ministry's money than the Minister is particularly comfortable with," Vuneren added with a smirk. "A few of the more informed old families are already considering the withdrawal of their assets."

"The goblins will make them pay for it –"

"Not enough, and it will be entirely too quick for our liking," Desdame interrupted, leaning forward to give Fleur a penetrating glare. "It does not help that the Minister is entirely too quick-tempered when dealing with 'inferior creatures'. The goblins have already been insulted once with the break-in at Gringotts, and they will not tolerate another slight."

"So what does this have to do with me?" Fleur asked, worry creeping into her gut – she suspected she knew where this was going. "I cannot mediate between the goblins and Dumbledore, if that is what you are asking –"

"Far too dangerous, and Dumbledore already has Bill Weasley working on that problem," Vuneren said curtly.

"What we need from you is your cooperation in negotiations with the goblins on behalf of Harry Potter."

Fleur's eyes flew open. "You have got to be –"

"Delacour, this is no game," Vuneren hissed. "Mr. Potter needs access to his money, and you know the goblins won't give it to him without considerable... persuasion."

"They won't negotiate with me – a part-Veela who supposedly collaborated with –"

"Keep your voice down, and listen!" Desdame snapped. "We have a powerful bargaining chip, and that is the files taken from Gringotts in the first place. Those can be returned."

"That will not be enough to appease the goblins –"

"We know, and that is why we will be providing them with this." The lawyer pushed a paper, dense with text, across the table towards Fleur. "This is a binding magical contract, already sealed in blood by Harry Potter himself, for full disclosure on financial and business matters pertaining to the relationship between Mr. Potter and Gringotts."

Fleur cautiously spun the paper to face her and began carefully scanning the document. "And what is the point of this?"

"A show of faith," Desdame replied immediately. "Show them that a wizard is willing to be straightforward and honest with his dealings."

"Only for you to double-cross them in the fine print," Fleur muttered with disgust. "It won't be enough, you know. The goblins are masters of reading between the lines, and they'll see right through your ploy –"

"Who says this is a ploy?" Desdame countered. "Such disclosure is greatly desired by Mr. Potter, and there are no caveats in his offer. He wants the truth, and he's willing to offer complete disclosure for it – particularly regarding one file he removed."

Fleur understood in a second. "He wants to know where the rest of the Potter files are."

"And the goblins should want to know as well, as an incomplete file is as much of an insult to their practice as an appropriation," Vuneren added, tapping the paper twice. "Both sides get what they want – and complete disclosure allows coordination, so if the Ministry attempts any unregistered 'financial seizures' without due process of the law..."

"I see," Fleur said, understanding Harry's game. He's trying to set himself up to negotiate on his own terms with the goblins, but the only reason he's able to do so is because he has things the goblins want...

"But that's not all we called you here for, either, Miss Delacour," Desdame said primly, pulling another folder from her briefcase as she tucked the first one away. "We would like you to endorse this statement."

"What is this?" Fleur asked warily.

"A press statement, intended for a few hours before the Minister makes his statement," Desdame replied with a grin. "A statement made with the consent of both Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter and with the witness with him the day of the attack on Ollivanders, stating that you are willing to testify on his behalf."

Vuneren threw Desdame a sharp look – clearly, the 'protector' had not expected this document.

"Would I have to deliver the statement myself?" Fleur asked, a bit of nervousness creeping into her voice as she read the paper.

"Absolutely not," Desdame replied. "If anything, you will be at work, as far away from this as we can possibly manage. However, you do realize this is no small thing Mr. Potter asks of you."

“It makes you a target,” Vuneren said bluntly. “Fudge won’t like to hear that a member of the Ministry is giving statements supporting this –”

“The Department of Magical Finance operates with an unprecedented amount of autonomy, Nymphadora, and it will take time for Fudge to muster any sort of offense,” Desdame replied sharply, glaring at Vuneren.

“You know the Prophet won’t print it –”

“Of course they won’t, the Minister is leaning on the Prophet as it is,” Desdame snapped. “We’re targeting the international journalists who are going to be hungry for any dirt on the current Ministry administration – and they’d be more likely to listen to one of your own, a French national, over one of the Minister’s cronies. It also gets the message out publically, something that is very desirable at this point.”

“But Harry’s always tried to keep things low-key,” Fleur said, the beginnings of a headache blossoming behind her forehead. “He fought very hard so that the public wouldn’t hear his interrogation –”

“It’s a different situation,” Desdame cut her off abruptly. “The truth needs to be told, and Mr. Potter currently has a degree of protection –”

“That Miss Delacour will not have,” Vuneren interrupted.

Desdame did smile at that point – a crafty, self-satisfied smile. “As a matter of fact, she will have protection. You see, as a part of the goblin negotiations, there is a sub-clause that dictates that to avoid foul play the negotiators are to remain sacrosanct from all conflicts that could disrupt negotiations. The beauty of this little clause is that the press statement could be released and Miss Delacour would remain completely protected under Gringotts and goblin accord. The Ministry could attempt to arrest her, but then they would risk direct interference in goblins affairs – and a war with our world’s largest and most secure bank would be a political catastrophe.”

“The Minister for Magic here does not seem to care all too much, though, considering he’s now planning war against Albus Dumbledore,” Fleur pointed out.

“A decision that is already being questioned, and that the Minister will have to defend – the Prophet can only run its line of interference for so long,” Desdame finished crisply, folding her hands and looking intently at Fleur. “Well? Will you consent to the statement?”

“Clarissa...”

“Quiet, Nymphadora,” Desdame snapped. “Well?”

Fleur hesitantly picked up the pen and took a deep breath before quickly signing her compact signature at the bottom of the page, which the lawyer whisked back into the folder.

“Is there anything else?” Fleur asked.

“Just one more thing, that Mr. Potter requests,” Desdame replied. “According to him, you have a form of ‘information-sharing’, is that correct?”

Fleur’s heart began to beat faster, but she nodded. Why would Harry tell this lawyer about that? I thought we were going to keep things confidential!

“I have been instructed by Mr. Potter to receive a report regarding what you might have seen or heard that he needs to be aware of.”

She tried to keep her motions casual as she looked around the room, her eyes trying to find the watchers. Merde, why does Potter want to meet somewhere so public? If we are overheard...

“Well?”

Fleur leaned close, and beckoned for Desdame to do the same. “I think,” she muttered, “that someone is getting very interested in me in that Department.”

“Casual interest or serious?”

“Miss Desdame, when the head of the Auror Department comes knocking, you answer the door.”

Vuneren inhaled sharply, and for a second, even Desdame seemed to react. But a second later, the emotionless mask had been replaced.

“Is he snooping?”

“He’s made it well-known that he’s looking for something, but he has not specified what,” Fleur whispered. “Tell Mr. Potter that his presence is starting to worry me a great deal.”

“Do you think he knows something he should not?” Desdame asked, her expression very tense as she nervously drummed her fingers on the table.

“If he does, he’s concealing it very well,” Fleur replied. “My concern is that he’s on assignment from the Minister...”

“It’s not that,” Vuneren said abruptly.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Desdame replied, her eyes moving across the room to the group of goblins in the booth – all of them were staring as one at the three blondes at the table. “Miss Delacour, I thank you for your time, but you might want to Disapparate immediately. Head to the bathroom and return to work.”

“But how can Potter handle Scrimg—”

“Just go!”

Fleur stood up quickly and began to walk. The din was still loud in the dining room, but she could hear Desdame’s voice, edged and dangerous.

“Vuneren, cover the bill. We’re leaving, and we need to talk – now.”

* * *

“That was too close, you shouldn’t have come.”

“Harry, I haven’t talked to you in a couple of days, and you need to be up to speed, now more than ever,” Tonks replied as she Metamorphosed in mid-step, her hair returning to bubble-gum pink. “And you didn’t exactly tell me you were meeting with Fleur –”

“No time,” Harry replied quickly as they stepped into a small, junk-filled store with the words ‘Locke’s Best Antiquities’ creatively misspelled on the grimy glass door. “We need to get out of sight before people start thinking to track us.”

“Then why exactly did we go into this place?”

“Owner’s an old friend of Dumbledore’s, and he smokes far too much Knotgrass for his own good,” Harry replied, carefully maneuvering around a pile of discarded books. Shoving back a rug to reveal a small, rusted iron ring, he drew his wand and wrenched the trapdoor open. “If he even sees us, he won’t remember it.”

“What the hell is down there?” Tonks asked, holding her nose. “Smells like something inhuman died in there.”

“Knowing this fellow, probably,” Harry said with a grimace as he slowly descended the stairs. He had gotten much better at controlling the simulacrum, but the stairs were steep, and descending a narrow staircase made of rotting wood while in heels was hardly something that was easy for anyone.

“Where’s your body?” Tonks asked, yanking the trapdoor shut behind her. “And won’t somebody see the rug shoved back?”

“It’s been spelled to conceal the door, so I doubt it,” Harry replied bracingly, brushing cobwebs away from his face as he navigated between the piles of unsorted furniture and books towards a small table that actually looked a bit clean. “And to answer your first question, the reason I can’t contact you is because Fudge is intercepting everything we try and send out of Hogwarts. And my ‘real’ body is hidden in the secret passage behind the mirror. Once I switched over, I grabbed the Invisibility Cloak, went through the working passageway into Hogsmeade, and caught a Floo down over to Diagon Alley.”

“Followed?”

“Doubt it. We both know Fleur was, though.” Harry’s eyes narrowed as she shoved a heap of dirty ashtrays off an old armchair and began brushing off the soot. “The goblins in the back weren’t exactly subtle.”

“And that only shows you how smart they actually are,” Tonks replied with a wink. “My bets are that they paid off the waiter – he certainly wasn’t accepting my bribes, which makes me think the goblins got to him first. And I know the Ministry wasn’t involved – not this time. They don’t have the manpower right now.”

“You think the goblins will be interested?”

“Damned if I know, it’s the first I’m hearing of this plan,” Tonks retorted. “Whose ideas were those?”

“Dumbledore’s, mostly,” Harry replied with a shrug as he finally sat down, “albeit with a bit of my personal tinkering. He wanted me to help negotiate on behalf of the Order considering how everything went to hell with the Ministry, but I figured that with the files as a bargaining chip and with the whole disclosure agreement, I could stand to get some valuable information. Besides, Dumbledore is getting what he wants, in a way.”

“So you’re finally starting to trust him?” Tonks asked, incredulity filling her voice as she sat down opposite Harry on a creaking stool. “You’re actually trusting Dumbledore now?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Harry replied darkly, “but right now, there needs to be some cooperation if we want to stop it...”

“Stop what?”

Harry lowered his voice. “Remember those girls? Something drove them insane, and it would be just like Voldemort to do something like this – somehow. We haven’t exactly figured out how he could have done it, but Dumbledore’s got a few shrewd ideas.”

“And most of his shrewd ideas turn out to be right,” Tonks finished with a shiver. “Drove them insane, Harry?”

Harry closed his eyes and clenched both of his fists. “Three of them are completely unresponsive. The last one... well, she’s responsive, but something messed her up pretty badly. I did manage to get a clue, though, if you could check up on it.” Reaching into the briefcase, he pulled out a crumpled stack of paper and tossed it to Tonks.

“ ‘Stoker’,” she whispered after a few seconds. “For some reason that sounds familiar... something from History of Magic.”

“ That’s what Dumbledore thought too,” Harry agreed. “He’s searching the library to see if the name comes up anywhere, but the Hogwarts library is not infallible.”

“It could be Muggle,” Tonks suggested. “I mean, there is a chance the girl –”

“Su Li.”

“Pardon?”

“That was the girl who told me. Her name was Su Li.”

“Makes sense, considering she’s Chinese. Anyways, this clue could point towards something Muggle. The fact that ‘Stoker’ is an English word or name has some promise.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she could have said some word in Chinese that neither of us have the least bit of familiarity with, and that was a definite possibility, considering all four of those girls were Asian. Have you considered checking any books on Asiatic rituals?”

“He had Moody do it. Nothing.” Harry sighed. “So, do you think you could turn something up for me, maybe check some Ministry records?”

“I’m lucky I got the time off to talk to you right now,” Tonks replied, a note of disgust moving into her voice as she slumped against the table.

“Bad times in the Ministry?”

“Fudge is trying to find a politically expedient yet legitimate way to declare war on Dumbledore, and he wants to use the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as his army, both Hit Wizards and Aurors,” Tonks said grimly. “His initial press conferences have gone as well as could be expected, and a lot of the public doesn’t have a clue about the truth surrounding the brawl at Hogwarts. But the amount of bureaucracy Fudge is trying to wade through to make this legitimate is causing chaos in the Ministry – not to mention the fact that half of his staff don’t have a bloody clue how to run a government in a time like this...”

“Since when is Fudge trying to get any vestige of legitimacy?” Harry asked furiously. “He let Umbridge do whatever she pleased until Dumbledore threw her out!”

“Hey, you should be thankful for it,” Tonks replied with a shrug. “Word of mouth is that the whole thing was Scrimgeour’s idea, that ‘going through due processes makes it easier to convince the public.

Technically true, and Fudge is running with anything that will boost his popularity and accomplish his aims, but I know a stalling tactic when I see one.”

Harry frowned. “Hold on a second – why would Scrimgeour want to stall Fudge?”

“Think about it, Harry – the sooner Dumbledore has his say, the less chance Fudge will be able to convince the public that Dumbledore’s a traitor to the wizarding world and a tyrant, and it’ll be less likely we’ll have a civil war. If Dumbledore can convince the public of his point-of-view, with enough rationality and evidence to back up his case, Fudge’s plans won’t even get off the ground – he’ll look like more of an idiot than usual. And none of this could happen if Fudge had tried to do things his usual way.” Tonks grinned. “And I’m sure you can see Scrimgeour’s political motivations from a mile away.”

“He thinks that if Dumbledore’s message is believed...”

“It’ll discredit Fudge, thus giving Scrimgeour a shot at the Minister for Magic position when Fudge gets sacked,” Tonks finished, leaning across the table. “Harry, this is the key thing here: Dumbledore only needs to convince the international journalists of his point of view, and there’s plenty who would listen to Dumbledore over Fudge in a heartbeat – don’t forget, Dumbledore’s an internationally regarded wizard, and there were more than a few major wizarding leaders that were angry Dumbledore was demoted. Problem is, those international journalists are being sequestered within the Ministry until Fudge can give his talk.”

“Of course,” Harry growled, finally seeing the truth behind the little ‘assignment’ Dumbledore convinced him to do. I should have known it looked too easy. “Makes thing a bit more complicated, but I’m sure... wait a second, do you know where they’re keeping the international journalists?”

“They have quarters in the Ministry itself,” Tonks replied cautiously. “Are you thinking of sneaking Fleur in and leaking the information early? That’s crazy.”

“Not with simulamancy, your contacts in the Ministry, and the right wheels greased,” Harry said, an eager glint creeping into his eyes. “It shouldn’t be difficult –”

“Harry, hang on, I don’t have the clearance to access the international journalists,” Tonks cut him off, her voice serious. “And they’ll have good security around them – Fudge is terrified of an international incident that might draw attention before he’s ready.”

Harry thought for a few seconds before a grin crept onto his face. “What about Scrimgeour?”

“What about him?”

“Do you think he would support our little plan? I mean, he wants Fudge gone as much as anyone right now, because it gives him a shot at power. And it’s obvious he’s hoping that the Wizengamot shoots down anything Fudge tries to push through involving the Aurors.”

“Harry, he’s in charge of the security –”

“Then it should be easy for him to look the other way,” Harry said, waving his hand impatiently. “Hell, if you get on the security detail, it should be simplicity in itself to get in.”

“Once again, not so simple, Harry. Look, if Fudge finds out – and believe me, he will find out – he’d fire Scrimgeour in a heartbeat, regardless of evidence,” Tonks said grimly. “Bones is already on tenterhooks about her position, given that she was a little more verbose in her opposition to Fudge’s plan, and the last thing we need is one of Fudge’s cronies running the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. And if we get caught... well, you know better than anyone what would happen then.”

Harry clenched his jaw. “Fine, I won’t bring Fleur in, but we’ll still need to get in. Fleur can give her statement to the one person writing for the Prophet who we can rely on.”

Tonks' mouth fell open. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

Harry shrugged. "It was Dumbledore's idea. Apparently, she's more on our side than anyone else over there right now – and she's dying for a chance to make Fudge and Umbridge's lives miserable."

"Making lives miserable is what Rita Skeeter does," Tonks muttered darkly. "I don't think this is a good idea, Harry."

Harry took a deep breath. "Then you won't like what I'm asking you for now. I want you to get in contact with Scrimgeour, and tell him that Harry Potter wants to meet him – in person."

"You're right, I don't think that's a good idea," Tonks said, her eyebrows shooting into her hair, which had gone a fiery red in protest. "In fact, I think it's a terrible idea – it's reckless, and if anyone else finds out –"

"Scrimgeour's got more to lose by bringing me in than by listening to me," Harry said curtly, getting to his feet. "Why do you think he's poking around the Department of Magical Finance so much? He's trying to make sure his record is spotless, in case Dumbledore or I try and use any more blackmail to make his life miserable and destroy his political career."

"And you still kept the file with the old blackmail from last time," Tonks finished, shaking her head incredulously. "Harry, you told Scrimgeour you destroyed that. If you use it again –"

"Hopefully, it won't come to that."

Tonks snorted.

"So, you'll help me?"

"I'll convey the message, and I'm going with you in case we need to make a quick getaway, but let me put it on the record that I think this is an extraordinarily bad idea."

“Duly noted.” Harry carefully checked his watch. “Damn, I’ve got to get out of here, I’ve got another meeting. Mind bringing me back to Hogsmeade?”

“Why not?” Tonks replied with a sigh. “I’ve got to get back to work, anyways.” She stretched out her arm and smiled slightly. “Care to take hold, Miss Desdame?”

“Of course, Nymphadora,” Harry replied, feigning a delicate sniff.

“You know, I don’t have a problem hitting girls – or boys possessing them.”

“But what about hitting on girls?”

Tonks smirked as she took a hold of Harry’s arm. “Harry, Harry, you assume I have no boundaries... I’m disappointed.”

“Well, do you?”

“Nope, but that kind of assumption often ends up with one person sweaty, screaming, and very naked in provocative positions over the nearest table.”

Harry shrugged. “You know, I could be interested.”

“Maybe you are now, but then again, I haven’t specified who’s on the table.”

* * *

Draco Malfoy gritted his teeth as he leaned over Nott’s desk, a dangerous look on his face.

“I thought you were going to make Potter suffer.”

“I did,” Nott replied distractedly. “The plan was flawless in concept and execution, just as the Dark Lord planned.”

“Were you dropped on your head as a child?” Malfoy snarled. “This was a bloody disaster! Umbridge and H.A.I.T. are gone, Dumbledore has made his position clear and has given Potter unprecedented freedom, and bloody Mad-Eye Moody is back at Hogwarts! And you think the plan was flawless?”

“Cool your temper, Malfoy,” Zabini hissed.

“Well, Blaise, are you satisfied with these results?” Malfoy said furiously, rounding on the calm black wizard, drumming his fingers on the desk. “You told Nott to make Potter suffer – so, in your august opinion, did he do enough to fit your ‘requirements’?”

“Draco, who said he was done?” Zabini asked with a disgusted huff. “I’m sure Nott’s plan is far from concluded –”

“Presuming we’ll be able to do anything at all, with Moody breathing down our necks!” Malfoy snapped. “And you didn’t even target people Potter knows or even gives a rat’s arse about! No, you targeted four Ravenclaw girls – the closest thing to allies we Slytherins even have!”

“Perhaps, Draco, you don’t see the point of this kind of tactic,” Nott said suddenly, his eyes glittering as he rose to his feet. “It’s a different type of warfare, what the Dark Lord is looking for us to achieve here –”

“I’m not stupid, Nott –”

“No, you’re not stupid – but you’re something worse,” Nott said, a twisted smile rising on his sallow face. “You’re weak.”

Malfoy stiffened. “What did you just call me?”

“And I’m starting to think it isn’t just you, Draco – wasn’t your father brought down by Harry Potter?” Nott laughed harshly. “A bit of an embarrassment, don’t you think?”

“Don’t you dare insult my father,” Malfoy growled, his fingers moving towards his wand even as blood rushed to his pale face. “I swear, Nott, I don’t give a damn that the Dark Lord gave you the mission –”

“And it’s a damn good thing he did,” Nott said, a cruel look on his face, “because you would never have had the spine or balls to follow through with it.”

Malfoy did draw his wand then, but Nott was unfazed.

“You wouldn’t dare jeopardize the mission.”

“The mission goes the way I command it, Nott,” Malfoy snarled. “I’m in charge here –”

“Sorry to break you free of your delusion, Draco, but you’re in error again – I’m the only one who can work the magic. I’m the only one who can command the necessary powers that we need.” Nott’s eyes blazed as he raised a wand of his own. “And I believe that makes me the one in charge.”

Zabini finally stood and glared at both of them as he drew his wand.

“Have something to say now, Blaise?” Malfoy asked through gritted teeth.

“Only that this fight is beneath all of us, and if you two don’t start behaving like adults rather than children, I’ll take it upon myself to end it for you,” Zabini replied evenly, his voice suggesting that even the very argument he was involved in was beneath his notice as well. “And if it wasn’t for the fact that everyone is at lunch right now, we’d be likely having a very unpleasant conversation with Pince or silencing some imbecile in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now both of you sit down and shut up. The plan goes forward as the Dark Lord wants it – no exceptions or complaints.”

None of them even suspected that someone was listening – and that she had been listening since the very beginning.

* * *

“He won’t fight for us,” Harry said flatly. “Not after everything he’s been through.”

Dumbledore sighed as the two of them approached the old, ivy-covered gate. “I know that better than most, Harry. I’ve known Nathan Cassane for a very long time.”

“Then why are we here?” Harry demanded. He was back inside his regular body, but he almost wished he was back inside his simulacrum. It might be acting, but at least I’d have anonymity there... “There’s no point even trying to convince a man like him of something like this! The only reason I had any success was because...”

His voice trailed off. Like it or not, he really didn’t know why Cassane had supported his case before the school governors – he didn’t expect that his feeble arguments had meant a damn to the distant old man.

“We are here,” Dumbledore began, “because I believe that he could very well provide us with crucial information regarding the magic inflicted upon those poor girls a few days ago. Nathan Cassane has travelled widely – more than any wizard likely still alive today, including Lord Voldemort and I - and his knowledge of magical history is impeccable. If this magic has been used before within or without Hogwarts, he likely has an account of it.”

“But didn’t you manage to find some things in those old Headmaster diaries?” Harry asked with a frown. “I mean, I’m sure there was something there.”

“There were many things, Harry, but even I cannot read hundreds of books in a few days,” Dumbledore replied, carefully drawing his wand

and pointing it towards the gates. “And given that all Hogwarts Headmasters seal their diaries – often filled with dark and rather personal secrets – it is impossible to use searching spells to find exact details with a wave of a wand. So thus I must use older, more time-consuming means to search for the truth.”

“And Professor Moody’s still combing the library whenever he can,” Harry finished, looking up at the gate again, trying not to fidget with nervousness. “So you think Cassane will know something?”

“If he is unable to identify the ritual, he would at least be able to recognize the name ‘Stoker’,” Dumbledore said, his brow furrowing as he frowned. “The only man I can remember with that name was one Abraham Stoker, who died in 1912. He was a Muggle who managed the Lyceum Theater in London. I actually had the pleasure of meeting him on the opening of a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, and although he did not recognize me, I would say that those productions starring Henry Irving were very well done indeed.”

“Did he have any sons or daughters that could have some connection to this?” Harry asked eagerly, albeit unfamiliar with the strange title of the play.

“Harry, I genuinely don’t know,” Dumbledore replied thoughtfully. “I cannot recall any Stoker attending Hogwarts, though... I may have to check through the old rolls.”

“And I guess I’ll ask Cassane about this,” Harry finished, hesitantly touching the gate only for it to dissolve, once again, in his hands.

“Ah,” Dumbledore said with a hint of a smile returning to his face. “He’s expecting you.”

“Of course I am,” a new voice came from behind one of the beautiful trees that bordered the path. Harry’s eyes could only widen in astonishment as Nathan Cassane stepped onto the path, wearing a surprisingly stylish (if a bit outdated) brown Muggle suit.

“Nathan, it’s been too long,” Dumbledore began.

Cassane's eyes fixed on Dumbledore for a long few seconds before turning to Harry. "Indeed it has, Dumbledore, indeed it has."

Harry felt a jolt rise in his stomach – although he couldn't see the recognition in Cassane's face, he knew that the old man somehow knew him. But how...

"I received your letter."

"And your thoughts?" Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, but Cassane was already sadly smiling.

"You should know better by now, Dumbledore. That's why they call such things lost causes – because they're lost. I'm sorry, but you know better than anyone the reason why I can't. But we didn't come here to talk about that." Cassane shrugged as he leaned against the tree. "Or talk much at all, really. Harry, if you'd come up to the house, I'm sure we could make some progress."

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied, taking a deep breath.

"I'll take care of bringing Harry back to the school when we're done talking," Cassane said with a nod to Dumbledore. "Oh, and Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Nathan?"

"Check the books on vampires – you'll have won half the battle, if I'm correct. Early-to-mid nineteenth century, if my dates are correct. I'll have Harry here fill me in on the rest of the details."

Harry's mouth fell open. What?

A flash of recognition crossed Dumbledore's face, and with a quick turn, he Disapparated with a loud pop.

Cassane smiled for a moment. "Well, that ought to keep him occupied for a while."

“How did... I mean, how did you know?” Harry blurted. “Were we really that loud?”

“Harry,” Cassane said, taking Harry by the shoulder, “I’m sure Dumbledore told you that I’ve spent a good portion of my life searching for beauty. And not all beauty can be seen.”

“You found beauty in our... in our conversation?” Harry asked, not able to keep the note of surprise and incredulity out of his voice.

Cassane squeezed Harry’s shoulder comfortingly. “Very few can recognize the beauty of a well-solved puzzle, or of the sudden idea, but it’s one of those things, Harry, that you’d do well to cherish. For a few brief seconds, something makes perfect sense, and in our senseless world... well, such moments are a thing of beauty.”

Harry thought for a few seconds before shaking his head. “I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t think I really see it –”

“Call me Nathan, Harry, and let’s get back to the house. A good cup of tea in my study and a long, thoughtful talk... they’ll will let you see.”

Author's Notes: as always, thanks to my reviewers for their speculation and ideas - always a hoot hearing what you're thinking, especially considering I know how this story is going to end. In any case, here's the next chapter - as always, read, review, and enjoy!

“You summoned me, Professor?”

“Sit down, Draco.”

Malfoy cautiously took the chair opposite Professor Snape's desk. The professor didn't even look like he was paying the slightest iota of attention to Malfoy. Absorbed in a copy of the Daily Prophet, Snape's didn't even look at Malfoy.

After a few seconds, Malfoy drummed his fingers on the chair. “I'm sitting.”

“I'm aware, Draco.”

There was another few seconds of silence, and then –

“Is there a reason why I'm here?”

The tightness in Snape's jaw and the sudden whitening of his knuckles betrayed the professor's annoyance. Malfoy nearly allowed a smirk to cross his face, but a quick glance towards Snape stopped him in mid-expression.

“Why the hurry, Draco? Have I interrupted your busy schedule?”

Malfoy gritted his teeth. “You could say that. I might have a free period, but I would –”

“I have been charged with a new task, Draco.”

Malfoy paused. And he wouldn't have mentioned it unless...

“It has something to do with –”

“Speak one more word about that and I’ll have you magically silenced,” Snape snapped, the paper snapping down in an instant. Malfoy jumped at the sudden move, but Snape only rose to his feet, glaring down at his student.

“There was a mistake.”

Malfoy’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“A mistake was made,” Snape said grimly, “and the Dark Lord has charged me with its rectification.”

Malfoy struggled for words. “But we... we followed... I mean, we did everything the Dark Lord told us to –”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” Snape snarled, slamming both palms on the desk, and Malfoy felt the first twinges of fear run down his spine at the expression on Snape’s face. “There are ears in this castle, as well as eyes, the owners of which would have no compunctions squeezing the truth out of you.”

“Dumbledore keeps Moody on a short leash –”

“With your type of attack?” Snape’s scowl grew even deeper. “It’s a wonder Dumbledore hasn’t approached you himself.”

Malfoy’s heart started hammering in his chest. “He... he knows?”

“He knows an agent was responsible for some, if not all, of this attack, and it is only a matter of time before he starts asking questions of those with the closest connections to the Dark Lord.” Snape leaned over the desk, his dark eyes boring into Malfoy. “And no amount of Occlumency will save you from him, Draco.”

Malfoy swallowed hard at the dire words. “We covered our tracks, there’s nothing to even tie us to the attack –”

“And the Dark Lord knows that you are the ideal scapegoat in this sort of investigation,” Snape finished, folding his arms over his chest.

“Hence why he entrusted the duties to Theodore Nott, allowing you to speak the truth – that you know nothing of the magic you have unwittingly unleashed.”

“Nott wants me to know it,” Malfoy growled. “He’s going to make my life miserable in Slytherin –”

“You should be less concerned with Nott and more concerned with the wizard in your year who is capable of murder,” Snape said, neatly folding his copy of the Prophet as he kept an eye fixed on Malfoy.

Malfoy scoffed. “Potter doesn’t have a clue.”

“He’s believed you are the villain before, and that was when he had scruples,” Snape said coolly. “He’ll be coming for you, regardless of what Dumbledore has to say – and Potter’s shown himself willing to kill those who get in his way. He reportedly killed Dmitri Kemester, a trained Hit Wizard, and his knowledge of lethal spells is growing.”

“Kemester’s not the only one he killed,” Malfoy said after a few seconds.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “So your father told you.”

“Of course he did,” Malfoy growled savagely. “He killed Blaise’s mother and for what he did to my father...”

“Draco, vengeance is not your concern, your father already has that well in hand,” Snape replied icily. “I have heard his most recent plan.”

“And?”

“And I am not to tell you, because that sort of game is something that your father wants kept out of Hogwarts,” Snape snapped. “You’re already a target, Draco – if he knew you had any sort of ties to Lucius’ newest plan...”

“Fine, it’s not my concern,” Malfoy said bitterly. “So what’s your ‘task’ then, Professor?”

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously, and he leaned over the table again. Draco immediately began to regret his scornful, disrespectful remarks.

"Providing that you followed the Dark Lord's instructions to the letter," Snape growled, "I am to determine the cause of that magical disjunction that occurred while I was out of the school. I can only presume that you were working on the mission that night?"

Malfoy swallowed hard. "Nott was. Blaise and I just... watched."

"That night was also the night Potter vanished from this school," Snape said, his dark eyes blazing. "The records were not nearly falsified well enough to indicate he was in the Hospital Wing, which leads me to think not only did Potter have an accomplice, but that what he was attempting was both secret and dangerous. I suspect that whatever magic he worked, it was tied to the subsequent convincing of one Nathan Cassane to support his cause."

Malfoy snorted incredulously. "Potter, convince the Supreme Mugwump? That's insane."

"Cassane voted with Potter, and the only evidence we have that the two ever had the slightest bit of contact was when Potter's legal counsel met with him hours before the school governors voted. So, assuming Cassane did not vote out of the goodness of his heart, we must draw the conclusion that something was used to coerce or trick him, and I suspect whatever that was may have been created or worked during the night Potter disappeared."

"And you think that might have created that... magical effect? Around the entire castle?" Malfoy asked, disbelieving. "Potter's not that skilled."

"Obviously, which makes me believe he had help," Snape snapped. "Now listen closely – Dumbledore was also investigating that magic, but his efforts were momentarily stymied by your mission's aftermath. It will not take him long, however, to begin to draw connections

between those fell effects and yours. The Dark Lord only knows what the long-term effects of that disjunction will actually be....”

“So what does all of this have to do with me?” Malfoy demanded.

“I want reports,” Snape snarled. “I want information, I want facts, I want dates and times, I want to know whenever Nott uses the littlest magic in the course of this mission, and most of all, I want discretion. Nothing to draw attention to me, you, Nott, or Zabini, because if one of you breaks....” Snape turned away, his eyes shadowed.

“We won’t break,” Malfoy said quickly.

“I am playing a very dangerous game, Draco,” Snape said darkly, “and if we are exposed, there will be no mercy for you and less for me – from either side.”

“Dumbledore wouldn’t kill us,” Malfoy said, unable to keep the hesitant note of uncertainty out of his voice. “I mean, we’re his students, he wouldn’t dare –”

“You were responsible for unleashing evils into his school that drove four innocent girls over the brink of insanity,” Snape interrupted. “I would not be so certain of how far Dumbledore would – or would not – go. After all, he’s only –”

The professor jerked in mid-word, and his tightly clenched fist slammed into the desk, quavering for a few seconds.

“Professor, are you all right?”

“Get out, Draco,” Snape whispered through uneven clenched teeth.

“But I just want –”

“Now!”

Malfoy was moving before Snape's other fist slammed against the desk.

* * *

Snape breathed very quickly, unable to keep the flush from his face as the pain radiated up his left arm. He was thankful he hadn't been holding any potions ingredients – as it was, Malfoy was already suspicious...

He could not Disapparate within Hogwarts, but he could use the Floo Network – not even Dumbledore could monitor all the fires at once, and he would be gone for but a moment...

He hurled the handful of powder into the simmering coals behind his desk, and, clenching his teeth against the pain, he shouted the name of the Dark Lord's newest hideout before diving into the flames.

Grates whirled past his vision, and even though he could feel himself spinning wildly, it still didn't pull his mind away from the pain...

And then he heard a voice – one he never expected to hear.

“Well, well, well, I never expected the flames of hell to be so green.”

Snape could only watch in shock as the poltergeist materialized. His whirling motion slowed, and he could feel the flames growing hotter all around him. This is impossible, I can't be stopping in the middle of the Floo Network!

Peeves cackled madly as he whirled around Snape, flying faster than even the fire had spun. “It won't get so easy, you know! It never does!”

Snape opened his mouth to speak and promptly inhaled a mouthful of hot ash. It was all he could do not to gag and choke on the cooled embers coating his tongue.

“You know, Snape, you ever wondered why we’re here?” Peeves asked conversationally, stopping his own flight even as Snape stopped rotating in the fire. The flames around him were getting hotter and hotter, but Peeves didn’t even seem to care. “You know, here instead of there?”

It’s hard to care about the meaning of life while you’re being roasted alive! Snape thought furiously, frantically wiping the greasy sweat from his brow. The heat was stifling, hotter than most potions ever got, and he knew it was only going to get worse if he could not free himself. Apparition’s out, and Merlin knows what diving into another grate would get me, but a Portkey might just work...

He scrabbled for his wand, thankful that he had treated it against heat years ago – it was a common practice for potion-makers – and yanked a glass bottle free from his robes, which were beginning to smolder and char...

“And you know what’s funny, Snape?” Peeves asked with a wicked smile. “You were already going there, and now you’re trying to get back to here! Climbing up a waterfall of that Great River, it was only a matter of time before –”

Portus!

“- you were torn free, only to fall forever!” Peeves finished with another insane laugh. “But you know, dear Severus, all too well, what goes around –”

3...2...1...

“- comes back around!” Peeves howled.

The yank behind Snape’s navel did not come, and for a second, he thought the magic hadn’t worked. But then he felt himself spinning, whirling, head over heels, back towards –

CRACK.

He was thrown from the fireplace backwards onto a cold floor, his clothes and hair smoking and covered in ash. The glass bottle shattered, and he could feel a trickle of blood leaking between his fingers.

One thing was certain: this was not Hogwarts, or the Dark Lord's sanctuary.

"Look, we've got a runner!" a figure in dark robes yelled from behind a makeshift pile of furniture. "Take him alive!"

Snape got to his feet and raised his wand, even as a dozen Hit Wizards descended upon him.

* * *

The sitting room of Nathan Cassane's house, Harry discovered to his astonishment and pleasure, was just as magical as the drawing room.

Ivy wreathed the massive arched window set into the stone wall that supported a third of the roughly hexagonal room, but golden sunlight still streamed through. The other walls were paneled with dark wood, but Harry could see subtle veins inside the wood glow golden. Around the high-ceilinged room, mismatched armchairs and oaken tables were strewn with leather-bound books, papers, more of the strange brass instruments, and what appeared to be a pile of Muggle electrical equipment that Harry didn't recognize.

"Well, take a seat, Harry," Cassane said, nudging aside a few books with his foot into a corner of the room. "Mind the oscilloscopes and radiance coils on the chairs over there – they tend to spark more than they should, and I haven't had a chance to fully adjust them."

"Right," Harry said nervously, stepping away from the strange equipment and taking a seat in one of the few open chairs in the room. It creaked comfortably under his weight, but Harry didn't notice. He was watching Cassane, who had drawn his wand and was sending a score of brass mechanisms whizzing into the air to rotate around the room.

“I apologize for the mess,” Cassane replied with a hint of a shrug, taking a seat in a massive leather armchair next to the fireplace. “I haven’t had much of an opportunity to clean since I got back from my last trip. I only returned for the vote, as a matter of fact. I haven’t even had time to get those installed properly.” He pointed at the electrical equipment, which sparked threateningly at him, the screens flickering to life for a brief second before shutting off.

“I thought Muggle electronics don’t work where there’s a lot of magic,” Harry said slowly.

“And so they don’t – not usually, anyways,” Cassane finished with a grin as he waved his wand again. A few glasses zoomed out of a small concealed cupboard, along with a rather dusty bottle. “But, from time to time, wizards try to make them work. From everything I’ve heard, Arthur Weasley is notorious for it. The funny thing is, a group of American wizards down in Texas have made remarkable progress.” He laughed once, the deep sound filling the room. “A pity the rest of their fragmented wizarding society will never be able to utilize it.”

“Wait, you were in the United States before you came here?”

“It’s an interesting land, Harry – far less developed than our own and hardly a coherent whole, but still interesting,” Cassane said with a shrug. “Whiskey? It’s not Firewhiskey, if you’re wondering.”

“Aren’t I under-age to be drinking that?”

Cassane gave Harry a frank, knowing look. “And you’ve cared before?”

“I... well, that’s –”

But Cassane was already chuckling as he set aside his full glass to pluck Harry’s out of the air. Pointing his wand at the glass, he filled it neatly with water before sending it flying across the room to Harry.

“Irrelevant? Different? Similarities between the two are interesting to note Harry, if only for their parallelism.”

“Uh... right,” Harry replied, looking around the room. Built into the walls were massive bronze shelves, surprisingly barren of ornamentation. But resting upon the shelves were dozens of things, nothing like Harry had seen before. Many looked to be geometrically impossible, connected and built in ways that defied gravity or any other laws of motion and moving in ways that made Harry frown with disbelief. Strange, that I never saw anything like those in Dumbledore’s office... must be foreign...

“And indeed they are.”

Harry looked quickly back at Cassane, who winked, allowing a small smile to creep onto his lined face.

“Did you read my mind?”

“I saw your gaze and inferred,” Cassane replied innocently. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Some of them are,” Harry admitted after a few seconds. “The rest... I dunno, they’re weird more than anything.”

“And with each of them is a story,” Cassane finished, a strange note of sadness filling his voice as he rose to his feet, his fingers sliding along the cool glass in his hand, filled with an amber liquid. “It’s a shame, then, that too few people would want to hear such tales.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Harry said quickly, getting up himself to take a closer look. “Some of them look quite extraordinary –”

“And therein lies the problem,” Cassane interrupted, raising a long finger as he moved next to Harry. “Have you ever wondered, Harry, why you have never seen a wizarding museum, or why your History of Magic teacher is a ghost who repeats the same tired lines year after year? Think about it for a moment.”

Harry frowned. "I... well, I guess it's probably because most people find History of Magic boring... just not interesting, I think."

Cassane's laugh was bitter this time, the merriment gone. "If they only knew... no, this fault lies less with the wizarding world and more with our society in general. Too few have respect for what came before, and the lessons and truths of the ages. They prefer to gloss over the past, or worse, paint it in the garish colours of nostalgia." Cassane looked at Harry, and he was struck by the depths of the sadness in Cassane's brown eyes. "And it doesn't help that those who forget the past..."

"Are doomed to repeat it," Harry murmured.

"Very true," Cassane replied, turning away from the shelves and giving the electronic equipment a good swat with the back of his hand as it extended a bright tendril of electricity at him. "And you'll often find that history becomes a crucial tool when discovering the truth."

"What you told Dumbledore..."

"Is a piece of a history that you'll never learn in Hogwarts, unless you opt to take History of Magic past your O.W.L. year – and I can assure you, nobody ever does." Cassane sat down and took a sip of his drink. "Even the purebloods, who relish their long family trees so much, won't deign to take History of Magic."

"Probably because they consider it a waste of time," Harry said, unable to keep the blunt honesty out of his voice. "Binns is a terrible professor –"

"Oh, believe me, I know, but even with a good professor, they wouldn't take it," Cassane countered, setting his glass down with a hollow clink. "Perhaps because they are scared of what they might just find – how they might not be as pure as they think...."

"But that's hardly the point," he said suddenly, sitting up and looking intently at Harry. "You didn't come here to discuss whiskey or history with me – you came because –"

“I came because we need your help,” Harry said quickly, sitting down and picking up his water glass.

“Or rather, because Dumbledore thinks he could use my help,” Cassane countered smoothly, taking another swig. “Which I don’t believe the two of you require. Dumbledore is an extremely intelligent man, and I’m sure that with time, he could solve this problem in which you are facing at Hogwarts.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but the point here is that we don’t have the time,” Harry said, setting his own glass down after downing half of it in a single gulp. “Something horrible happened at Hogwarts, and we don’t have any leads. And coupled with the... conflict with the Ministry and with Voldemort, it makes things significantly more complicated.”

“Probably because the two of you are looking for connections where there should be connections, and not where the connections actually are,” Cassane replied cryptically. “The real world has never worked like that and it never will.”

“That’s not the point,” Harry said impatiently. “If we want to solve this before all hell breaks loose, we’re going to need help –”

“My help,” Cassane said sharply.

“Well... it would be appreciated,” Harry finished, rather lamely.

Cassane did laugh at that. “I’m sure it would be.”

“So... will you listen?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Why don’t you tell me the details, so perhaps I can understand the context of that little clue that was provided to you?” Cassane said after a second’s thought. “It is not my duty to help you with this, but I enjoy a good puzzle as much as anyone.”

“This is more than just a ‘puzzle’, Mr. Cassane,” Harry said, real anger filling his voice now. “People are ending up worse than dead because of this.”

“Then what exactly are you waiting for?” Cassane asked, swallowing the remaining whiskey in his glass with an interested expression that Harry couldn’t quite interpret. “Tell me more.”

* * *

“Harry’s gone again, isn’t he?”

“Before you even ask, Hermione, I don’t know where he went –”

“I wasn’t going to ask that,” Hermione said quickly as she shifted nervously in her chair. Given the chaos in the class, Charms was a good time to talk. “He doesn’t trust either of us enough –”

“He trusts me just fine, thank you,” Ron interrupted, frowning with concentration as he pointed his wand at the glass of water on his desk that he was trying to freeze. “Hell, he saved my life from that lunatic –”

“Didn’t he kill that lunatic?” Hermione shot back. “In cold blood?”

“It was self-defense, and frankly, I can’t blame him,” Ron snapped, jabbing his wand at the glass vigorously. “I mean, he would have killed Harry if he had the chance!”

Hermione swallowed hard and quickly froze the water in her glass with a quick jab of her wand and a muttered word.

“How the hell can you do that so easily?” Ron asked with frustration.

“Forget Charms for a second, we need to talk about Harry –”

“Is it more of a wave?” Ron muttered, eyeing his glass appraisingly, “or more of a jab? Can you do the motion again –”

“Ron, forget it!” Hermione said, incensed as she pulled the glass away from Ron and froze its water with another wave. “We need to talk about Harry! If he’s killing people now –”

“ You don’t think Dumbledore knows about it?” Ron asked exasperatedly, snatching back his glass and prodding it with his wand. “If Harry was going to get expelled or punished, it would have already happened by now!”

“Listen to me, Ronald, if you had any idea what rumors are flying around about Harry right now –”

“And I already told you that Harry doesn’t give a damn about what anyone else thinks!” Ron retorted. “And I’m with him on this one – why should he care?”

Hermione looked as if she didn’t even know where to begin. Taking a deep breath, she lowered her voice again and cast a quick glance around the room. Judging by the sounds of shattering glass, Flitwick was likely occupied.

“Do you get the feeling that Harry’s not the only one hiding things from us this year?”

Ron snorted. “Hermione, I’ve been hiding my grades from you all year so you don’t have a nervous breakdown at the few ‘D’s I got –”

“You got a ‘D’?”

“Don’t sound so bloody scandalized, I’ve been busy!” Ron said with irritation, finally unfreezing the water with a muttered Warming Charm. “Anyways, I haven’t noticed anything that strange, besides, well...”

“H.A.I.T. getting thrown out and whatever happened to those four Ravenclaw girls,” Hermione finished worriedly. “Not to mention that magical effect that sparked when Harry went missing –”

“Dumbledore told us not to worry about it,” Ron said tiredly. “He’s investigating it –”

“That was the day Harry went missing, you know.”

Ron groaned as he turned back to his glass. “Hermione, we’ve been through this already! Just because Harry went missing the very same day as that magical...‘thing’ happened doesn’t mean they’re connected! Isn’t saying they are some sort of falsery you were lecturing me about on the train –”

“This is not a fallacy of composition!” Hermione said heatedly. “Harry’s up to something, and he’s not the only one! Either way, something very bad is happening at Hogwarts!”

Ron was about to snap at Hermione, but then he remembered the dark circles under Malfoy’s eyes... and the sharp words that Snape had given him in the Potions class for no apparent reason...

“What are you thinking?” he asked cautiously.

“Oh, don’t be an idiot, Ron!” Hermione said angrily. “Whatever happened to those girls, Harry’s disappearance, that magical light show around Hogwarts, the fact that nobody’s been able to sleep this term –”

“You honestly don’t think that has anything to do with –”

“It’s not normal!” Hermione retorted. “And coupled with the fact that Malfoy’s somehow involved –”

“Keep your voice down,” Ron warned, his eyes darting around the room as he hastily pointed his wand at the glass. “Damn it, why won’t this thing freeze?”

“You’re enunciating the wrong syllable, but that’s not the point!” Hermione said, grabbing the glass again and shoving it aside. Water splashed all over the table.

“Thanks a lot,” Ron muttered sarcastically.

“Aguamenti,” Hermione snapped, pointing her wand at the glass and instantly refilling it with a stream of water from the tip of her wand.

“That’s a sixth year charm! How do you know –”

“It doesn’t matter, Ron!” Hermione said irately, grabbing his arm and pulling Ron down to her eye level, her hair getting bushier than ever with her frustration. “We both know Malfoy’s involved in this – I overheard him arguing with Zabini and Nott in the library at lunch.”

“I thought Malfoy didn’t have the time of day for Zabini or Nott,” Ron said suspiciously. “Granted, I’ve seen him around them more this year, but I figured, considering his usual company –”

“And you haven’t noticed that Pansy’s avoiding Malfoy like the plague?” Hermione pursued.

“Last time I checked, I wasn’t monitoring Malfoy’s social status...”

“Well, Parvati mentioned that he had Nott dump her for him before they came back to school,” Hermione whispered. “Now why on earth would Malfoy do that?”

“Maybe because he’s an imbecile?”

“Ron, this isn’t like Malfoy – he’s trying to distance himself from people, even Snape. This isn’t like him, and I think...” Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath before lowering her voice even more. “I think he might have been behind what happened to those Ravenclaw girls.”

Ron paled for a moment before snorting. “That’s crazy. Malfoy doesn’t have the balls for something like that –”

“He’d do it if he was under orders,” Hermione whispered grimly, “and you know who would be giving those orders –”

“You don’t think... not You-Know –”

“Mr. Weasley, although I’m glad you’re enjoying the companionship and help of Miss Granger, I would ask that you demonstrate the Flash-Freezing Charm,” Professor Flitwick said reprovingly. “Well?”

Ron swore under his breath and turned away from Hermione. He knew he probably couldn’t cast the charm, but...

He closed his eyes and pointed his wand firmly at the stubborn glass. Have to keep my voice low...

“Gelumorsis!”

The glass shattered, the water frozen into a dark block of ice. All across the table, the spilt water had crystallized, forming icy white lines of frost snaking across the wood. Ron felt the temperature in the room drop slightly before returning to normal.

Professor Flitwick coughed twice and sighed. “Practice, Mr. Weasley, is important here than power. More control is necessary with your work.”

Ron could barely restrain a snort and a sigh of relief that Flitwick hadn’t recognized the spell Ron was casting.

The bell rang, and Ron began piling his books into his bag when he felt Hermione’s tight grip on his arm.

“That wasn’t the Flash-Freezing Charm,” she said with narrowed eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Ron retorted.

“I saw a flash of black leave your wand, Ronald Weasley. What was that spell?”

Ron scowled. “I told you, Hermione. I’ve been busy.”

He had just been very careful not specify with what.

* * *

Cassane was silent for a few moments as he looked at a spot on the hardwood floor, lost in thought.

“So the bloodstains were moving up the walls?” he began slowly.

“Yeah,” Harry replied, swallowing hard.

“And Dumbledore confirmed that the protections against spiritual penetration around Hogwarts were intact?” Cassane pursued, his eyes narrowing.

“Right.”

“So we’re obviously talking about something internal,” Cassane muttered, getting up and moving towards a precariously stacked heap of books. “And you’re telling me there are Death Eaters in the school?”

“According to my source, three,” Harry replied, shifting slightly in his seat.

“And yet four girls were affected, so it rules out that,” Cassane murmured, tossing the top three books in the pile aside without a second glance. “Message was written in blood, you said?”

“Yes,” Harry replied slowly.

“Obvious blood magic, and with the clue the girl gave you, it’s obvious,” Cassane muttered, tossing another book aside and pulling open a very battered black journal. Harry was suddenly reminded of Riddle’s diary, and he tensed in his seat, his hand sliding towards his wand.

“What do you mean, obvious?”

Cassane let out an exasperated snort as he tossed the small book aside and looked at Harry, his brown eyes flashing. “Stoker, Harry, Stoker. Think about the name for a second. Dumbledore was right on the money when he remembered the man – just not in the way he was thinking.”

“I thought this Stoker fellow was a Muggle,” Harry said cautiously.

“And he was, but just because a man is a Muggle doesn’t mean he doesn’t have any knowledge of our world,” Cassane pointed out, giving the electrical instruments a swat with the back of his hand as he returned to his seat. There was an exaggerated casualness in his sprawl, as if what he knew was something casual – and horrifying. “Take Merlin for instance – there’s so many stories about him in the Muggle world, it’s unbelievable – and more often than not, they have a surprising amount of truth. Well, I shouldn’t say that, really – those that do the research often find enough of the truth.”

“And you’re saying... well, you’re saying that Stoker was involved in that whole thing?” Harry asked with confusion. “That he knew about us?”

“Not our world, exactly – after all, the Obliviators would have been on him faster than a Firebolt can fly.” Cassane’s expression was a mix of bitterness and disgust as he took a swig from his tumbler. “No, Stoker knew about one element of our world, and not very much at that. ‘Course, it was enough for him to find his little niche in history – both Muggle and our own.”

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. “What did he know about?”

Cassane didn’t answer immediately, his fingers sliding up and down the edge of his glass, a deliberating motion, watching the golden whiskey cascade around the edges of the tumbler.

“Tell me, Harry, what do you know about vampires?”

Harry sat bolt upright. "There are vampires in Hogwarts? How did they get in? How –"

"That wasn't the question I was asking," Cassane replied sternly. "How much do you know about vampires?"

"Not... not really a lot, I guess," Harry replied after a few seconds of thought. "We've mostly been focused on goblin and giant wars in History of Magic... I mean, I assume that –"

"That a lot of the Muggle literature surrounding them is true?" Cassane finished with a snort. "If anything, the Muggles were on the right track, but then went completely in the wrong direction. Vampires aren't the masters of sex and magic that they're often made out to be – nah, our world has marginalized them far too much for that. Witches and wizards are damn good at driving away those who could be a threat to them, and vampires are just one more example. Of course, they had a damn good reason for doing so."

Harry thought back to the few anti-vampire lessons he had had, first with Quirrell and then with Lupin. "They have a lot of weaknesses, though. Garlic, mirrors, sunlight –"

"And that's the funny thing," Cassane mused, setting aside his glass. "They have all those weaknesses, and yet they're still considered too dangerous. So we drove them into the isolated corners of Britain, or clear onto the continent, where most of them fled east, where they joined with the survivors of Grindelwald's army." A twisted smile crossed onto Cassane's face. "Of course, they regretted it when the Iron Curtain came down."

"Iron Curtain?"

"When the border between the East and the West solidified, beginning the Cold War," Cassane said impatiently. "It wasn't just for the Muggles, you know. I mean, we had our own internal problems, but there was still serious animosity between us and the Soviets. Not easy to explain the details, but basically, the vampires got a rude shock when confronting the Red Army. They like playing the

aristocrat, and too few of them were prepared for the onslaught of the proletariat.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Cassane chuckled. “It’s not important, Harry. The point is, the vampires were decimated pretty handily, at least those that went east. Believe me, I went to Transylvania in the early seventies, looking to find the rumored fortresses, and that was one hell of an adventure.”

“As much as I’d like to hear about that, what does any of this have to do with Hogwarts or that Stoker fellow?” Harry asked tersely.

Cassane leaned forward, his eyes suddenly gleaming with intensity. “Listen closely, Harry, and listen well. Stoker also travelled to Transylvania, doing some background research, and nobody knows what he really found there, but when he returned, he wrote a book: Dracula.”

“So... so you’re saying Dracula is real?” Harry asked incredulously. “Just like Merlin and the rest?”

“Well, nobody really knows for sure, now, do they?” Cassane said, raising a finger. “Nobody really knows if he met vampires or not in those Merlin-forsaken mountains, but I suspect he did. When it comes down to it, nobody really knows whether the great vampire lord Dracula really existed or not. Personally, I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes much more sense for ‘Dracula’ to be a concoction of a group of vampires looking to raise their social status with the Muggle world,” Cassane replied with a shrug. “Remember, they were marginalized by us, and they wanted to reclaim their power, so their supplies of fresh blood wouldn’t run dry. What better way to regain popularity than through a figurehead like the great vampire lord Dracula?” The older man chuckled as he took a swig from his glass. “Mind you, they had already tried that tactic in our world in the early nineteenth century – one of the reasons that they were exiled.”

“But why would they even be popular?” Harry asked, mystified. “I mean, they suck blood!”

Cassane smirked. “Harry, it’s the sex appeal, and it worked nearly two hundred years ago just as well as it works now. Of course, anyone who’s ever met a vampire knows the truth – and I’ve met a few – that they’re craven, grasping, avaricious little scavengers that prey upon those too stupid to figure out what hell they’re dropping into. I don’t think there’s any coincidence that they can take the form of a flying rat.”

“I’m getting confused here,” Harry said as Cassane refilled his glass. “Are you saying that you don’t think vampires are involved?”

“I know that Dumbledore won’t let any young vampires into Hogwarts,” Cassane said, rising to his feet and moving towards the window. “Even Dumbledore, the great protector of the rights of other magical species, knows that admitting vampires into Hogwarts would be paramount to the destruction of his school. But that doesn’t mean that vampires couldn’t have been involved in this.”

Harry frowned. “Okay, now I’m really getting confused.”

“Come with me to the library, and I’ll show you.”

Harry followed Cassane into a room that could have come right out of Hogwarts. His eyes widened as he saw the high shelves, reaching up to an ivy-covered stone dome. The room was filled with wooden bookshelves, separated by high, arched windows and polished marble columns. The room seemed almost too massive to be included inside the house, and Harry felt disoriented as he followed Cassane towards a bookshelf at the back of the room.

“Are these all of yours?”

Cassane laughed. “Well, you could say that, but I don’t believe I legally own half of these.”

“Then who does?”

Cassane scratched his chin. “Libraries across the world, several prominent government institutions, a couple wizarding schools, and probably more than my fair share of rich and very dead individuals.”

“You stole those?”

“Remember Harry, it’s not theft, it’s archaeology,” Cassane said with a knowing wink. “Let’s see here... ah, here’s what I was looking for. Originally in the possession of one of the few vampires out east that has any power whatsoever, I borrowed it when I was ‘visiting’ his manor.”

“ ‘Borrowed’?” Harry asked, raising his eyebrows. “Just ‘visiting’?”

Cassane gave Harry a very frank look. “It was the early seventies, Harry. If you had been alive then, you’d understand.”

Harry looked at the book, still firmly lodged in the shelf, and froze. Beneath the cover, he could hear a faint rustling, and he could see the flicker of metal...

“That’s a blood magic book.”

“What do you think vampires specialize in?” Cassane said, his voice still light as he drew his wand and magically pulled the tome from the wood. The blades were visible now, and Harry noticed that all of them were serrated and looked extremely sharp.

“Wait a minute – so you’re suggesting that those girls used some sort of blood magic?”

“It would be easy enough to explain,” Cassane said calmly, levitating the book onto a nearby table and flipping it open with a quick swish of his wand. “You have to realize one key thing about vampires, Harry, and that is that they are cunning. They can read people very well – allows them to prey upon the weak very easily. So when they tried to assume greater power back in the early nineteenth

century, they simply released a few volumes filled with blood magic, with promises that it would fulfill all of one's desires, be it sex, money, or immortality."

Harry swallowed hard. "They really couldn't do that, could they?"

"Well, they liked to think that they could," Cassane said with another twisted smile, "and too many young and very stupid people fell right into that trap. Most of the blood magic had a singular purpose – to bind and control those idiots to the whims of the vampires. Most of them didn't survive. If anything, that ritual you described at Hogwarts sounds a lot like that."

"But... but why?" Harry asked, his mind still wrestling over the startling facts Cassane had given him. "It doesn't make any sense!"

Cassane paused, and Harry could swear he saw a hint of a smile cross the older man's face. "Go on."

"The girls were Ravenclaws, and they would be smarter than to attempt a ritual like that without full knowledge of what they were doing!" Harry exclaimed. "I knew one of those girls, and she wouldn't try something like that, it doesn't make sense! And if you're right, that sort of magic wouldn't drive the girls insane – why would the vampires want slaves who have lost their minds? And besides, if Dumbledore's magic is correct, it said that while the girls drew their own blood, the stains on the walls were caused by a different person, but –"

"They were both caused by the same entity," Cassane finished, his hands coming together with a slow, deliberate clap. "Well done, Harry, you've learned how to think, something that seems to be omitted from the Hogwarts curriculum – and you don't need my help after all."

"You told me all that, I wouldn't have been able to figure it out on my own –"

“I gave you the background, Mr. Potter, nothing more,” Cassane said with another smirk as he closed the book with a wave of his wand. “So, reason through the problem.”

Harry frowned. “Could the girls be vampires themselves... no, wait, that wouldn’t work, someone would have caught onto it by now... and Dumbledore ruled out external possession, by Voldemort –”

“Of course he did,” Cassane murmured, not meeting Harry’s eyes.

“Pardon?”

“It’s not important. Go on, let’s see what you’re thinking.”

“The only thing I can really think of is the Imperius Curse,” Harry whispered. “Someone placed the curse on them to control them, manipulate them into doing that sick ritual... that way, the same entity would have both drawn the blood and made the bloodstains and they would have remained separate... from a certain point of view.”

“And the insanity?” Cassane said after a few seconds.

“Last year, we learned a badly cast Imperius Curse could addle the brains of the victim,” Harry said, swallowing hard. “Something could have gone wrong... or the ritual interacted with them in some way.”

“Interesting hypothesis,” Cassane said after a few seconds, drumming his fingers along the table, perilously close to the blades protruding from the book. “I can spot a few holes in it, though.”

“Really?”

Cassane raised a finger. “One: the Imperius Curse requires a considerable amount of effort to sustain, and thus I doubt any Death Eaters at Hogwarts would be able to sustain it for more than one person at a time. If I recall, even Voldemort himself had difficulty with that.

“ Secondly, while the Imperius Curse might cause some to temporarily lose their wits, it’s a temporary effect. What you have described in those poor girls is far from temporary.”

“We don’t know that,” Harry retorted. “They could recover!”

Cassane paused, and for a second, Harry could see a wave of pain cross the man’s face. “Of... of course they could,” he said, his voice so soft it could barely be heard. He shook his head. “Merlin....”

“You said there was three things,” Harry said after a few seconds.

“Right!” Cassane said, his expression suddenly becoming intense again as he raised his third finger. “Thirdly, and finally, the Imperius Curse can be fought, and given those girls are Ravenclaws, they would likely have some degree of understanding of the ritual before it was begun. After all, they’d have to read the bloody thing. And it is very rare that one’s Imperius Curse is strong enough to drive another to kill himself.”

Harry swore under his breath – Cassane was right. There were holes – huge ones – in his logic. At least I’m getting closer...

He froze, and he felt his air leaving his lungs in a long, protracted gasp.

“You remembered something, didn’t you?” Cassane said softly, his eyes lighting up. “The missing link – speak, Harry, speak!”

“The book...” Harry whispered, looking down at the quivering tome upon the table. “There was no book in that room – and you said the ritual had to be read.”

“Just because you didn’t see the book doesn’t mean the book wasn’t there at some time!” Cassane said, gripping Harry’s shoulder and shaking him. “Think, Harry! Who would have taken the book... if the book was even there at all at that time!”

Harry closed his eyes and tried to think as Cassane stepped away. If the book was there at all at that time... Peeves said there was three Death Eaters... but Peeves could not have taken the book, because that would have disrupted the magic, because the girls were still bleeding out when we arrived... and Tonks and I would have seen it if it were there when we were... but that doesn't mean the book couldn't have been there at some other time...

Some other time....

A time before...

Harry's eyes snapped wide open. "I... I..."

Cassane leaned against the bookshelf and ran his hand along the aged, cracking wood. "Harry," he began conversationally, "who told you there were three Death Eaters at Hogwarts?"

"Peeves," Harry said, the word slipping from his lips before he could stop himself. "The poltergeist."

"Not a ghost, perhaps, but something that lived before," Cassane said, finally meeting Harry's eyes. "Events tend to repeat themselves, Harry. Remember what I said: those who forget the past..."

"Are doomed... to repeat it," Harry finished.

* * *

"He's late."

Lucius Malfoy shifted awkwardly in his seat, trying to ignore the excruciating pain he felt whenever he moved his legs or hips. "I... I'm sure he has a reason for not arriving yet, my Lord – and given his location, it proves a bit more difficult –"

"The Mark burned nearly an hour ago, and he has still not arrived," Lord Voldemort hissed. "If, indeed, he is going to arrive at all –"

The flames of the nearby grate burned green, and Malfoy struggled to his feet as a dark-robed figure tumbled out of the fireplace – nowhere near as ostentatious as the other connected fireplaces in the manor, but he did not want to take any chances.

“You,” Voldemort began dangerously, “are not Severus Snape.”

The figure straightened and threw back his hood, revealing scarred features. “My lord, Snape’s not going to be meeting you any time soon.”

“Where is he?” Voldemort growled, and some colour fled the Auror’s face.

“Well, currently he’s laid up in an Auror infirmary with a shattered jaw and pelvis, a fractured skull, a broken nose, and a severe concussion,” Wilson replied with a shrug. “The Hit Wizards are monitoring the Hogwarts Floo connections, and his wand was drawn when he came out. He’s lucky to be alive.”

“Snape is very good at surviving,” Malfoy muttered. “No Hit Wizard is going to bring him down –”

“All the same, his absence limits the amount of Polyjuice Potion I can use – and with him in custody, it makes acquiring Veritaserum much more difficult,” Voldemort hissed, his eyes burning with anger. “I’m assuming you managed to appropriate the vials on his person?”

“Shattered and lost, or boiled away to insignificance,” Wilson replied tersely. “Nothing could be recovered –”

“No matter.” The Dark Lord turned towards a small trunk tucked away in the corner of the room and flicked his wand at it. A moment later, a tiny vial zoomed into Voldemort’s open hand. “Lord Voldemort always has a backup plan...”

“My Lord, that amount may only sustain the transformation for a short –”

“I am not a fool, Lucius,” Voldemort said coolly, pulling an extremely tiny flask from his dark robes and emptying its contents into the vial with a single smooth motion. “Fortunately, the protections surrounding his home will be easy enough to defeat, so this will not require much time.”

“Convincing a man like him will take longer than –”

Voldemort paused for a moment and turned back, fixing Malfoy with a disgusted look as he raised the vial to his lipless mouth. “I remember the first war, even if you do not, Malfoy. Cassane will not be convinced... so he will die.”

* * *

“It’s the only thing that makes sense, but there’s never been any evidence that there are evil spirits at Hogwarts!” Harry said, frustration filling his voice as he paced around the table.

“I wasn’t the one who came to the conclusion, Harry,” Cassane replied with a shrug. “Although the evidence that you’ve collected seems to fit.”

“But why would they let ghosts that could hurt someone into Hogwarts?” Harry said, running a hand through his hair, not meeting Cassane’s eyes. “Dumbledore would never allow it –”

“You’re right,” Cassane said abruptly, “under no circumstances would he ever allow something like that. But there have been ghosts that have visited Hogwarts before, correct?”

“Well, Nearly Headless Nick had a Deathday Party in my second year, but I didn’t think any of those ghosts were bad... well, except Peeves, but he was never this much of a problem before!”

“Who says he’s a problem now?” Cassane challenged. “If anything, that damned poltergeist has pointed you to every single poignant clue you’ve discovered – I wouldn’t be so quick to excise him from your thinking.”

“Okay, fine, but that still doesn’t mean there are genuinely bad spirits at Hogwarts!” Harry said, furiously racking his brain for any ghost that could have possessed the four Ravenclaw girls. “I mean, the Bloody Baron might be the closest –”

“His story is more tragic than malevolent, I’d say,” Cassane said, levitating the blood magic book back into its spot on the shelves. “But once again, just because you haven’t seen it doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

“But no Headmaster or Headmistress would allow ghosts like that into Hogwarts – I mean, they’d get rid of them or something –”

“While you can expel a spirit from a dwelling, it remains exceedingly difficult, depending upon the attachment the ghost has to the location,” Cassane said carefully. “Often times it requires a great deal of specialized magic and equipment – not to mention a great deal of gold. The Department of Mysteries does a great deal of work on the subject, and even they have enormous difficulties. One of the main reasons why Headmasters have balked over getting rid of Peeves in the past, as a matter of fact – they cannot justify the removal, or rather, the money it would cost to remove a poltergeist that is ultimately insignificant.”

“So you’re saying that if this happens again –”

“It will,” Cassane said darkly.

“There’ll be nothing we can do to stop it?” Harry’s eyes went wide. “We could lose Hogwarts?”

“I did not say that,” Cassane replied, crossing his arms over his chest, a tiny hint of a grin on his face. “There are brands of magic that deal with possession, and its removal. It just doesn’t help that the magic is complex, dangerous, and almost certainly illegal.”

“Why would it be illegal?”

“Because there are a lot of politicians with a grudge against the Church that killed a load of their forefathers hundreds of years ago,” Cassane replied conversationally, shaking his head with an incredulous motion, as if he couldn’t believe their stupidity. “And since the Church has been dealing with exorcism since, well, before the Church was a church, it’s often considered their territory and thus Dark. I doubt there’s a book on it in the Hogwarts library.”

“I’ve never heard that before... wait, you’re saying that the Church has magic?”

Cassane laughed. “Of course not, Harry! Well, I shouldn’t say that, per say – there a few wizards within the Church, after all – but faith’s an entire different dragon compared to magic. Hasn’t stopped the magic of exorcism from being demonized, though – although there are a few things involved in it that would make one pause and reconsider.” Cassane laughed again, although this time, the sound was short and bitter. “After all, meddling with another person’s mind, trying to wade through a sea of memories and thoughts to find the lurking monster within... well, it’s certainly not for the faint of heart.”

Despite himself, Harry shivered as he remembered Su’s long, agonized scream in the Hospital Wing, the madness in her face. And she wasn’t even possessed then...at least I don’t think she was...

“And, of course, once you get the ghost out, you have to be able to banish it immediately,” Cassane added nonchalantly. “Otherwise someone else could be at risk – or the angry spirit could try to possess you. That’s when Occlumency comes in handy.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Cassane rolled his eyes. “It’s basically a magical method of mental defense against attacks. Not incredibly useful in my opinion, unless you’re a spy and up against someone who is skilled at Legilimency – reading minds,” he clarified. “Nasty business – both learning it and defending yourself, and frankly, if you’re skilled enough with a wand and have a strong enough Blasting Curse, you’ll never have need of it.”

And if I'm in one of my simulacrams, I don't think they could read my mind anyways, Harry thought, a small grin growing on his face. At least that was what Tonks said...

"So you can banish ghosts?" he asked, following Cassane as he followed the older man back into the drawing room, where the electrical equipment in the corner sparked a sizzling greeting. "How? With what?"

"Spells, mostly," Cassane replied distractedly, his eyes scanning another pile of books strewn across the floor. "Most, if not all, you could find in the Hogwarts library with a decent search. Best of all, I would doubt that the majority of them – the dirty, common-as-muck variety – would be in the Restricted Section, so they should be easy for you to find."

"Not like it's stopped me before," Harry muttered. To his huge surprise, Cassane shot him a wink before turning back to the book pile and beginning to rummage through the heap.

"In any case, the trick will be figuring out the pattern of where these ghosts are coming from, and shutting it down for good," Cassane finished, pulling a surprisingly brightly coloured book from the bottom of the pile and tossing it to Harry. "That should help."

Harry quickly caught the book, and his eyebrows nearly shot into his hair. Not only was it a Muggle book, decorated in flamboyant yellow and black, the title was...

"No, I am not kidding you," Cassane answered Harry's unspoken question. "Logical Thinking for the Clueless. Picked it up in New Zealand about eight years ago out of general boredom and a lack of good archaeological hunts in the region. Damn good book, surprisingly – I heartily recommend it to any new graduate of Hogwarts and any old warlock who likes to lecture about literature in the Leaky Cauldron." He smiled wistfully. "And you'd be surprised how quickly it shuts them up."

“ ‘The best ways to recognize patterns and deduce conclusions, using proven methods’?” Harry read with growing bewilderment.

“Yep,” Cassane replied with a smile, sitting back in his armchair and seemingly creating a footrest out of midair with a wave of his wand. “Take it with you, give it a read – it can’t hurt you, Mr. Potter.”

“But what about the exorcism spells?” Harry asked after a few seconds, looking up as Cassane poured himself another generous helping of whiskey. “Do you know any of them?”

“Any person who has broken into enough tombs and ‘sacred places’ knows enough to get by,” Cassane replied carefully. “And I have travelled extensively.”

“Would you be willing to teach me?” Harry asked eagerly.

Cassane considered this for a long few seconds, before shaking his head. “No, thank you.”

“If you taught me, though... I mean, we could probably solve this in no time at all!” Harry exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. “You could come to Hogwarts –”

“No.”

“- And see the evidence for yourself –”

“I’m looking for beauty, not nightmares, Harry.”

“ – And we could probably solve this problem faster than just me and Dumbledore working on it alone –”

“I said no!” Cassane snapped, his eyes suddenly hard, his tone fierce.

Harry struggled for words, his incomprehension plain on his face.

“But... well, why not?”

“There’s a history between me and Dumbledore,” Cassane replied curtly. “An uncomfortable history, stemming back to the First War. With Moody as well. Even with your parents to some degree... your father and Sirius Black more than anyone.” The older wizard set his glass down, and did not meet Harry’s eyes. “No, I’m not going back to Hogwarts.”

“You... you won’t help me?” Harry could hardly believe the words coming out of his mouth.

Cassane fixed Harry with a very clear gaze, his eyes hard as mirrors now. “Listen, Harry, before you were born, I fought in the First War, and I did a lot of things... well, a lot of things I’d rather not remember. I was part of the group that was fighting Voldemort with fire and whatever other hell we could dredge up, and by the end of it, I had had enough. I spent years, Harry, years wandering the world, looking for something of beauty that could erase the flaming memories, something so I would not have to close my eyes and see them screaming...”

His voice trailed off for a moment, and for a moment, Harry felt a rush of fear. What had Cassane done, to make recoil like this?

“In any case, I’m content with my life... well, most of it anyways,” Cassane continued. “So I pose to you this question: why should I involve myself in a war that I no longer have any stake in?”

“But... but you do have a stake in it!” Harry exclaimed. “I mean, you’re the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards!”

“A position I would renounce in a heartbeat in favour of Dumbledore,” Cassane countered. “It’s not a job I want by any stretch of the mind, you know that! And as soon as Voldemort makes his presence known – which he will, eventually – the Ministry will be forced to reconcile with Dumbledore and he’ll get his job back,

leaving me to return to my regular life, minus politics, legalities, and those damned luncheons.”

“Luncheons?”

“Even the Dark Lord Voldemort himself would cringe at those accursed things,” Cassane said with a visible shudder. “I don’t understand how Dumbledore does it – apparently he even likes the damned things...”

“We’re not talking about luncheons here!” Harry said angrily. “Look, you wouldn’t have to interact with Dumbledore or Moody or Snape or anyone over at Hogwarts! You could act as an... as an...”

“Consultant?”

“That word works as good as any!”

“And at this point in time, if I did that, we would have civil war in England,” Cassane said crisply, folding his arms across his chest. “Think for a moment, Harry, if I was seen at Hogwarts – even my presence would be indicative that I’m supporting Dumbledore, and as soon as that information reaches the Ministry, Fudge would have no qualms at publically disgracing me and declaring war upon Hogwarts. And you don’t realize, Harry, how close he is to doing that right now.”

“So what are you, ‘neutral’?”

“I would prefer to say that I have no place in the conflict,” Cassane said reasonably. “And I would prefer it remained that way.”

“People will die if you don’t help us,” Harry said, very real desperation creeping into his voice. “I’m not asking you to fight Voldemort here –”

“But that is what is going to end up happening,” Cassane finished with a disappointed shake of his head. “I’m not an idiot, Harry. And people will die regardless of whether I participate or not – all that will change is whether or not the blood is on my hands.”

“Which it will be if you don’t help us!” Harry said angrily. “Look, when Voldemort comes back into the open, are you going to fight on our side?”

“Let me check my planner...” Cassane looked skywards for a second before looking back at Harry. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Who are you going to support, then? Voldemort?”

“Once again, Harry, this isn’t my war,” Cassane said, a very real edge in his voice now. “I had my war, thank you very much, and I’m not eager for second helpings.”

“You’re one of the most powerful wizards in Britain!” Harry exclaimed, nearly rising to his feet as he struggled to contain his frustration. “I mean, you’re one of the few wizards that could actually be worth a damn in a fight against the Death Eaters! Don’t you have a responsibility to help us, bring some good into the world?”

“Getting better, but a flawed argument, Harry,” Cassane replied, toasting Harry with a raise of his whiskey tumbler before downing his drink in a single gulp. “Just because a man has power does not mean he must use it to help others. If anything, a man with said power should exercise discretion, only using his power when he feels it necessary. And who is to say that Voldemort will not bring good into the world?”

“Oh come on, it’s Voldemort we’re talking about here!” Harry snarled.

“A self-obsessed, albeit powerful man who has a vision of utopia just as jaded as every other thinker in our fine world,” Cassane said, refilling his glass with a shake of his head. “And he’ll never be able to touch me.”

“I find that hard to believe!”

“Why?” Cassane countered. “Harry, this world has billions of people, and with the tools at my disposal, if I didn’t want to be found, I wouldn’t be.”

“Then why did you come back to take the Supreme Mugwump position?” Harry retorted. “If you hate the job so much, why did you take it in the first place, put yourself in a position to be found?”

“A last favour to Dumbledore,” Cassane replied simply. “A single favour, nothing more, nothing less.”

Harry struggled for words. He needed Cassane’s help – even if he could figure out what was happening at Hogwarts, he wouldn’t be able to stop more attacks from happening – not on his own. And he knew that with Fudge on the move, time was running out all too quickly.

“Look, think of it this way,” he finally began, searching his mind for ideas. “Let’s say that you hide, and Voldemort wins in the end. You know you’ll never have a home here again?”

“Very true,” Cassane replied somberly. “Unfortunately, if I choose to support Dumbledore, I wholeheartedly expect to lose my home as well... not to mention so much more.”

“Still, you would stand to gain more from Voldemort losing than from him winning.”

Cassane smirked. “Ah, you’re attempting to play the lawyer now, Harry? You keep forgetting that I fought in the First War. I saw what was happening to Dumbledore’s followers in the Order of the Phoenix – don’t act so surprised, I knew many of them. I saw what they lost – what I lost –in the fire.” The haunted look reappeared on Cassane’s face. “And any victory won with that cost is no victory at all. It would be better for me to leave and never set eyes upon the fair shores of England again than to lose what I lost before all over again.”

Harry swallowed hard. For a second, he contemplated asking what Cassane had lost besides his family, but then he closed his eyes. The less I know about that the better... at least for now...

"You know," Cassane said suddenly, "I'd offer for you to come with me."

Harry's eyes snapped wide open. "What?"

"You could leave, you know," Cassane said with a shrug. "The world is only a Portkey away, Harry Potter."

"I have friends here!"

"Then bring them over and we'll take them with us," Cassane said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Win-win, I'd say."

"I still have things to do here... and I have to be the one to kill Voldemort in the end," Harry said after a few long seconds of silence. "There... there was a proph- "

Cassane burst out laughing. "Oh, you're kidding me!"

"It's true!" Harry exclaimed, going scarlet. "I have to kill him before he —"

"Kills you?" Cassane interrupted, choking back more laughter. "You actually believe that load of bullshit?"

"I don't really have much of a choice now, do I?" Harry snapped. "And now Voldemort knows about it too —"

"Harry, prophecies only have so much power as we give them," Cassane said with exasperation, downing his next drink with another chuckle. "Otherwise they're just words. Bad poetry that might have a hint of being right, if we choose to believe."

“And Voldemort’s choosing to believe,” Harry snarled, not willing to give up now. “He’s going to keep trying to kill me until I kill him – and once he’s done with me, he’ll be coming for you too! He’s the strongest Dark Lord in centuries – do you honestly think you can hide from him? Do you think you’ll have any of that freedom that you love so much? He’ll never stop hunting you, once he’s done with Dumbledore and me.”

“Presuming he can beat Dumbledore –”

“According to the thrice-damned prophecy, I’m the only one who can beat him!” Harry replied hotly. “And you know that as things are, I can’t beat him alone! But if I actually have help, from someone like you, I could have a fair shot at it!”

“Perhaps,” Cassane admitted after a long pause. “No guarantees, though. Everything could be for naught, and then I will undoubtedly lose everything. You’re asking me to gamble against very long odds, Harry.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Harry retorted. “The game I’m playing, you have to risk it all to gain anything – and it’s not like I volunteered for this –”

CRACK.

Harry nearly jumped in his seat as a sudden acrid stench filled the room. Cassane was on his feet, and his wand was pointing at the electrical equipment, which was suddenly smoking and flickering with tiny flashes of electricity...

“That shouldn’t have happened,” Cassane said in a low voice, his gaze zooming towards the window. “Something’s happening.”

Harry got up and drew his own wand, his eyes nervously scanning the room. “Could it be one of your artifacts acting up –”

“No,” Cassane said flatly, his eyes moving towards the window. He stepped closer to it, knocking over a few stacks of papers as he peered through the glass.

He sighed, and closed his eyes for a long five seconds.

His gaze turned back to Harry.

“You should never have come here, Harry. It appears that... I’m involved already.”

“What?” Harry asked, moving up to the window and peering out at the lawn, where the path meandered between the trees...

Five cloaked figures were walking up the path, masks and hoods pulled over their faces. All of them had wands drawn.

The person in front didn’t have a hood or a mask – just a face, which was somehow more horrific. Harry’s heart began pounding within his chest. No... not now... not again...

“Before I died, I wanted to look in Sirius Black’s eyes and ask him why he betrayed his closest friend,” Cassane said softly.

He turned to Harry and smiled a mirthless smile. “Looks like I’ll finally get that chance.”

He woke suddenly – to pain and pitch darkness, to threadbare sheets and cold steel bindings, a hand over his mouth, and a wand over his throat.

“Don’t struggle, and don’t speak above a whisper,” his captor whispered, his breath hot and reeking, “otherwise the next ten seconds will be the rest of your life.”

Severus Snape had been in hostage situations before – although typically in those situations, he was the one holding the wand. He found he didn’t really like the change. But then again, he thought quickly, I don’t have much of a choice, and considering that fight, I’m lucky to be alive –

“I knew you were a smart man, Snape,” his captor growled. “Apparently not smart enough to avoid getting caught, but we all have our bad days. Some of us have them more than others, it seems.”

“What kind of interrogation is this?”

“The impromptu kind, where you don’t see my face, and you don’t say a word about anything when the real interrogators come.”

“Where am I?” Snape demanded, his eyes narrowing – it wasn’t going to do much good, the entire room was pitch black, and all he could smell was the sickly scent of burnt human flesh, but he was lying on a bed of some sort. Is it possible that the bed was moved... or that I was? “What time is it?”

“Not your concern, and mid-afternoon,” the other man spat, “but you seem to forget that I’m the one asking questions here, Snape, so shut the fuck up or your blood will be all over these nice clean walls.”

“You kill me, the Ministry loses a hostage,” Snape said automatically.

“Fudge only needs a corpse,” his captor shot back. “But then again, you have information I need, and I’d rather justify the pain I’m in with something valuable, so let’s talk.”

“I don’t have to say a word,” Snape spat.

A second later, there was a crack, agonizing pain erupted through his right hand, and he could barely restrain a shout. The rational part of his mind, however, was unaffected: this man is professional, and he wants something you have. That gives you power... and odds are, I’m still in the Ministry, and that means it’s only a matter of time before some comes to check up on me. So I either give him the information now and deal with the consequences later, or...

He felt the hot breath on his face again. “Oh, you really should start talking before I run out of fingers.”

* * *

“Mr. Cassane, look –”

“Forget it, Harry, I’m not letting you fight,” Cassane cut him off sharply, slamming the last of the locks on the front door closed with a wave of his wand. The brass instruments were streaming through the air like a machinist’s nightmare, and Harry could see something flashing bright orange from the drawing room door...

“I could help –”

“Not against this many of them, and just because they stayed out of Azkaban doesn’t mean they’re weak,” Cassane replied swiftly, giving his wand a skyward flick. Taking Harry by his shoulder, he pulled him back as what looked like a massive iron portcullis dropped from a hole above the doorway that Harry hadn’t even noticed,

“A portcullis?” Harry asked, amazed as a dozen massive locks magically crawled from the horizontal bars to the stone surrounding the oaken door, drilling themselves in with a harsh grinding noise.

“This house has been under siege before, Harry, and they’ll get one hell of a rude surprise if they try to hit the windows,” Cassane replied distractedly, pulling Harry back towards the sitting room as he pointed his wand at the small brass chandelier suspended in the foyer. Before

Harry could say another word, the chandelier began to rotate, the chains to the ceiling vanishing to leave the flaming brass circle hovering in the air.

“Right, that’ll hold them when they force the front,” Cassane muttered, striding into the sitting room, pointing his wand at the dozens of shelves along the walls, and throwing tiny bags onto the floor at their ends. Before Harry’s astonished eyes, the shelves tilted on hidden hinges, dumping all of their contents into the bags, which seemed to absorb everything into their bottomless depths. “And considering I’ve already sealed the library, I just need to handle the drawing room and get you out of here and I’ll be set. Grab those bags for me, will you?”

“Look, it’s not just about getting me out,” Harry protested as he grabbed the bags on the floor and tossed them to Cassane, who tucked them deftly into his jacket pockets. “Something’s wrong with Sirius, he shouldn’t be here!”

“Why?” Cassane said with a disgusted snort as he sent the electrical equipment flying into a final bag, where it landed with an audible crash. “He threw in Voldemort, I’m not entirely surprised he’s leading this posse.”

“But he’s innocent!”

Cassane paused before giving an even louder snort. “If I remember the paper correctly, he attacked you on the road to Hogwarts not too long ago –”

“Something’s wrong with him!” Harry said frantically, desperately trying to come up with something – anything – that would convince Cassane, a man who Harry guessed was more than capable of murder. “He’s not in his right mind –”

“Obviously,” Cassane muttered, more to himself than Harry. “Grab that book I gave you and follow me to the back patio, we don’t have much time.”

“But –”

“No ‘buts’, Harry, we don’t have time for them, and if we want to escape, I’d prefer to do it from there.”

“Wait... you’re running?” Harry exclaimed as he followed Cassane through the narrow hallways. It looked like the entire house was locking down around him – the doorway to the library seemed to have been bricked over and covered in cement in seconds. “I thought you were going to kill those Death –”

“That,” Cassane said curtly, “would be obvious.”

Harry nearly stopped in mid-step. “What the –”

Cassane spun around abruptly and fixed Harry with an angry gaze. “Listen to me, Harry Potter, and listen well: I’ve already told you that I am not getting involved in your little war! Coupled with the fact that the Ministry is always watching this residence, any magical conflict here would not be conducive to that aim! So, I’m leaving to go for a drink at the Hog’s Head, where you will get back to Hogwarts with all due haste, and where I will enjoy a few shots of Firewhiskey.”

“But... but everything that you’re doing here –” Harry protested.

Cassane gave Harry a frank look. “Harry, I am not my house. If those fools want to enter a residence that is more murderous and hostile than they are... well, I can’t be held responsible for what might happen to them! All that being said, if you do not want to be victim to the load of Garroting Gas that will be pumped in through the air conditioning in approximately ninety seconds, I suggest we head to the patio.”

“All right, all right, I get the point!” Harry said quickly, wondering how on earth Cassane managed to get air conditioning working in a house that was almost as magical as Hogwarts. He didn’t have much time to think about it, though, as they stepped out of the modest back door and onto a whitewashed, surprisingly large patio. It certainly wasn’t like Harry expected a wizarding patio to be: there were several ice

buckets were strewn about the deck, and what appeared to be a large Muggle gas barbeque tucked away in the corner.

“Hello, Carmen,” Cassane said cordially, giving a swift nod to the barbeque, which, to Harry’s absolute shock, made a peculiar whistle in what could only be a greeting.

“Did you... I mean, did you –”

“If there’s one thing those damned Texan wizards can make well with magic, it would be their barbeques,” Cassane said contentedly. “Backwards, utterly contemptible folks otherwise, but Carmen is a very special lady. Lay some good meat on her and she never disappoints.”

Harry was lost for words, and only went bright red at Cassane’s salacious wink.

“In any case, Harry, it is key you do not linger in Hogsmeade,” Cassane continued, abruptly serious. “I suspect Dumbledore will be looking for you, and it might not be a bad idea to pay him a visit and tell him what you know – even if you cannot trust him.”

Harry shot him a sharp look. “What are you implying?”

“I don’t trust Albus Dumbledore either, but for entirely different reasons,” Cassane replied tensely, looking into Harry’s eyes. “You, on the other hand... well, I’m sure you know that Dumbledore would do anything and everything in his power to make sure Hogwarts is safe, and in that, you share common ground. Build your partnership based upon your differences, not your lack of similarities.”

Harry closed his eyes against the rush of emotion in his gut – the distrust, the resentment, the frustration, the fear – but after a few seconds, he found it didn’t matter.

“Just because I don’t quite trust him,” he said finally, opening his eyes to see the sprawling, untamed lawn, and Cassane’s crafty smile, “does not mean I can’t work with him towards a common purpose.”

“Now that’s the spirit!” Cassane said with a beaming smile. “Now grab my arm so I can get a drink.”

“Didn’t you just –”

“Harry, why stop a good thing?”

Harry felt Cassane’s arm wrench away from him, and they Disapparated with a crack.

* * *

The echoing crack split the air, and Sirius Black lowered his wand from the hole he had been drilling through the solid stone wall, his eyes blazing.

“He Disapparated,” he growled, “and that means he left his house as a deathtrap.”

“Disapparation was around the back!” Amycus Carrow shouted. “He was off his patio –”

“Then he had company,” Sirius finished, an evil smile creeping onto his face. “Amycus, you take the two recruits and follow them – the Trace I planted in the Apparition Charms surrounding this place should give you a reasonable way to track them like I showed you. Avery, Alecko, you stay with me.”

Amycus paled. “My lord, I... Cassane is....”

“Beyond your abilities,” Voldemort hissed. “But not mine. Send a message with your location, and use the Mark to alert me when you’re ready – and only when you are certain. Then I will take it from there. Until then, I will be looking for what Nathan Cassane feels he has to hide.”

* * *

“So when they were found –”

“I already told you, I wasn’t even there at the time!” Snape snarled. “By the time I returned to Hogwarts, the Ministry’s flunkies and that bad excuse for a hag known Umbridge had already been evicted. I arrived on the scene when they were cleaning up. I wasn’t even there when they captured those imbecilic Hit Wizards who had been left behind.”

“Where are they kept within the castle?”

“Hogwarts has many dungeons,” Snape replied stiffly, “and the castle is very good at keeping her prisoners well-guarded. After all, if the room didn’t move continuously, it would make it easy for someone looking to free them.”

“And you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you –”

“More of my own choice, than anything else,” Snape snapped. “This is my last term at Hogwarts, and I have no interest in further involving myself in any more –”

“Complications,” his captor hissed. “Other loyalties, Snape, other than your Headmaster?”

“None that you’ll be able to take advantage of, if that’s what you mean,” Snape replied in a low voice.

“You were once a Death Eater –”

“As was Lucius Malfoy,” Snape retorted, “but he has made it quite clear where his loyalties lie.”

His captor’s grip tightened, and Snape could feel the wand digging into a particularly uncomfortable part of his throat. “So you have not been the one funneling information to Sirius Black regarding the location of Harry Potter?”

“I loathe Black,” Snape replied curtly. “The only thing I would be sending in his direction is a well-deserved Severing Curse.”

“Potter was working with Black – he rescued that criminal in the fight over the train,” the captor growled, more to himself than to Snape. “Could Black have tutored Potter in that sick brand of magic –”

Snape’s eyes narrowed, and for once, he was thankful that it was extremely dark within the room. “While Potter is as arrogant as Black and his father, he wouldn’t have the skill nor the fortitude to utilize that form of magic that cursed those girls.” And this fool doesn’t need to know it’s not a curse...

“And what was the curse?”

“How on earth am I supposed to know?” Snape snarled, his own patience starting to fray, the searing pain in his hands not helping his condition in the slightest. “I am not privy to whoever enacted that curse –”

“So, in other words, you know nothing of that magic –”

Snape’s eyes flashed. “Your guesses are as good as mine regarding that! Dumbledore does not even know the whole truth!”

“I doubt anyone at this point knows the whole truth,” his captor muttered. “At least your motives are clear.”

Snape could hardly restrain a snort, even as his heart was hammering in his chest. “I think that’s enough questions – you have what you wanted. Now give me the means to free myself or leave.”

The wand dug into Snape’s throat. “I have one more question, and if you lie to me, I’ll know.”

Snape was about to spit a response, but then light spilled from the tip of the wand, flickering upward. It wasn’t the cool yellow light that usually came from the spell – this light was hot, bright, and very orange, enough to throw the man’s face into sharp relief.

So it is him after all, Snape said, his lips curling slowly into a sneer. Why am I not surprised? Although why he is here begs an entirely different set of questions...

“You know who I am.” It was a statement, not a question.

Snape fixed his captor with a hard stare, filled with cold loathing. “Of course I do.”

The man's face was criss-crossed with burns, turning an already ugly face into something truly hideous. He was wearing crude, badly made robes, the type an underfunded hospital like the Auror Infirmary would give to a convalescing wizard. The man still looked like he hadn't totally recovered – Snape could see the horrendously charred flesh around the man's hands and forearms, and every one of his motions were halting and stiff, as if the painkillers he was undoubtedly on were only partially effective.

“You see this face,” the man hissed.

“I'm amazed you're still alive, much less holding me captive,” Snape replied icily. “You look like an Inferius reject –”

He couldn't strain out any more words, because his captor had just snapped Snape's middle finger with a brutal twist.

“Round the clock nerve repair, so I wasn't permanently paralyzed when I fell four stories and broke my spine and both my legs,” the captor growled, grabbing the collar of Snape's robes, holding the wand an inch away from Snape's eye. “Sub-par painkillers, because that hag wants me alive, but under her thumb so she can have her own revenge. Bad skin grafts that barely conceal the damaged nerves. And enough scars and burns, most completely impossible to heal, to turn me into a monster. They should have let me die, Snape, but I'm too damned valuable for my own good, so they postponed it. They want to give me one last purpose, but I'm not going to stand for that any more – too many questions to die and not have answers.”

“Then what do you want?” Snape whispered, his eyes meeting the dark, horrifyingly sane eyes of his captor.

“I want revenge. I want Potter to fucking suffer. But most of all, I want to know that the Ministry’s not going to war on a lie, against the wrong person.” Dmitri Kemester leaned closer. “So what about it, Snape: have we been played for fools? Is Voldemort really back?”

A moment later, the door was wrenched open, and Snape could only blink at the blinding light spilling into the room – and the shadow in the doorway.

* * *

“So this is the Hog’s Head,” Harry said, wrinkling his nose as they approached the grimy wooden door. “What is that smell?”

“History,” Cassane said shortly. “There’s a lot of it in places like this.”

“It smells terrible.”

“Well, in bars, history tends to accumulate,” Cassane said after a few seconds, giving the door a good shove. To his clear surprise, it didn’t even budge.

“Can’t be accumulating much if the place is closed,” Harry noted. “I mean, all the windows are shut and covered.”

“That’s insane, he wouldn’t close this early,” Cassane replied immediately, giving the door another shove with his shoulder, this one with a considerable amount of force, enough that Harry expected the tattered faggots of wood to easily break. But the planks refused to bend even an inch.

Cassane stepped back and drew his wand. “Someone spelled this – and it wasn’t the owner.”

“Do you think –”

“I want a drink, and answers wouldn’t be bad either,” Cassane replied, angling his wand at the door with casual elegance. “Alohomora.”

There was a rattle, but when Cassane went to put his hand on the doorknob, there was a yellow flash and the older man yanked his hand back, swearing under his breath.

“What was that?” Harry asked, stepping a bit closer, only to meet Cassane’s outstretched arm.

“Sealing Charm,” Cassane replied, a serious look on his face, as he raised his wand again, “and the owner would never cast one – hell, I doubt he knows how. And that means I want to know what the hell is going on in there. Saepio fractus!”

There was another yellow flash, and Harry could smell the pungent odor of smoke and burning rubber. Cassane was smirking, and he tucked his wand back into his jacket.

“That should do nicely,” he said, moving towards the door, “and you should get back to –”

The door opened beneath his fingertips, and Cassane was standing nose to nose with a drawn wand.

“Would you mind?” Rufus Scrimgeour hissed. “The door was sealed for a – what the hell...”

Before the Head Auror could say another word, Cassane had Disapparated with a loud pop – leaving Harry in plain sight.

Harry could see Scrimgeour’s eyes widen with shock, but Harry wasn’t willing to stay around and talk – without Cassane, he knew he was overmatched. He broke into a run, moving towards the other, more respectable shops –

Only to run straight into Scrimgeour, who had Apparated right into Harry's path.

"Oh, no, Potter, you're not getting away from me that easily –"

"I say, what is going on here?"

Harry yanked himself out of Scrimgeour's grip as Cassane reappeared from one of the side alleys, a large bottle of Firewhiskey in his hand. There was a winning smile across the man's face.

"Nathan Cassane, what is going on?" Scrimgeour snarled, seizing Harry's shoulder before he could dart away. "And I don't have time to chase you around, so cut to it."

"Well, I was just getting a bottle of fine Firewhiskey from Aberforth's stash behind the bar," Cassane replied innocently, hefting the bottle. "His scotch supplies are sadly lacking, so I figured a few sniffers of this wouldn't be too bad, and I didn't want to get in your way."

"Or pay for anything," Scrimgeour growled. There was a funny note in his voice, one that Harry really couldn't recognize. It wasn't exactly fear, but it wasn't anger either...

"And then I saw you accosting this young man," Cassane continued blithely, "so I was curious about your intent."

"He and I," Scrimgeour said through gritted teeth, "need to talk. And there was a reason why there was a Sealing Charm on that door."

"And a good one too, I might add," Cassane replied with an easy smile. "So who is this fine young fellow here?"

Harry nearly snapped with surprise, but then he saw the warning flicker in Cassane's eye, and he understood. "My name is Harry Potter, Mr. Cassane –"

"And he's not saying anymore, not until we're under cover," Scrimgeour snapped, taking a stronger hold on Harry's arm and

steering him back towards the Hog's Head. Harry didn't struggle, though – he knew Scrimgeour wouldn't hurt him. He wants to talk more than anything...

The inside of the Hog's Head was hardly prepossessing. The entire bar was small, shabby, and smelt strongly of goats. At first, Harry thought that the floor was dirt, but then he felt the stone beneath and realized that the floor beneath hadn't been cleaned in a very long time.

The bar was also nearly empty, with the exception of a hooded figure standing in the corner – a hooded figure that Harry recognized instantly. He didn't dare say anything, though. Can't jeopardize her cover...

"Do you want the door closed and the charm restored?" Cassane asked calmly, as he followed the two inside the Hog's Head.

"Yes," Scrimgeour said shortly, "and you on the other side of it."

"Rufus, we're old friends, there's no need to be so curt," Cassane said with a small grin. "We're on the same side, after all."

Scrimgeour tensed, and out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Tonks tense as well. He felt uneasy – he knew Cassane was trying to say something to Scrimgeour, but what?

"In any case," Scrimgeour finally said, turning towards Harry, a hard glint in his eyes, "you should sit down. Dumbledore's on his way, and I'd like to... address a few things before he gets here."

Harry gritted his teeth and took the seat opposite Scrimgeour. One glance at the Auror told him all he needed to know – the Head Auror did not want to be here, and the set of his jaw told him that Cassane's arrival was the last sort of complication that Scrimgeour needed. I can sympathize there, at least, Harry thought as he slid his chair closer to the table, considering this is the last sort of complication I need right now.

“You’re meeting with Dumbledore,” Harry began slowly, meeting Scrimgeour’s shrewd eyes. “And I’m guessing it’s in direct violation of recent Ministry –”

“When you’re the one who makes the policy, you can do whatever the hell you please – within reason, of course,” Scrimgeour cut him off, narrowing his eyes. “And that’s the reason why I’m here. Everything went to hell after that damned vote – a victory for you, I should add – and I’m here to clean up the mess before everything gets blown wide open.”

“And you want to talk to me because –”

“Don’t play games with me, Potter,” Scrimgeour growled. “You’ve been involved in this since the beginning, and I’m sure if I was watching this from a more objective position, I would laughing at the horrific irony of it all – that everything you’ve done has made things worse for everyone.”

“This hasn’t all been me, and you know that,” Harry said coolly.

“And that is one of the many reasons why I am here instead of working with Fudge to push a declaration of war through the Wizengamot’s bureaucracy,” Scrimgeour returned, fixing Harry with a penetrating stare. “There are too many coincidences for all of this to be you, Potter. And while Kemester connected some of the dots, the bastard never got close to the whole truth.”

“And now he never will,” Harry said grimly, matching Scrimgeour’s stare with one of his own. “You’re welcome.”

“We both did our part there,” Scrimgeour snapped. He turned to the bar, where Cassane was rooting around behind the counter. “Cassane, would you do me a favour, for... old time’s sake?”

“Yes?” Cassane replied brightly, coming up from behind the bar with two bottles of Firewhiskey.

“Get out.”

Cassane’s eyes went abruptly cold, and there was an edge to his usual cheery tone. “And I cannot enjoy a drink here because...”

“It’s private,” Scrimgeour said tightly.

“Which means absolutely nothing to me,” Cassane returned. “After all, I probably know more than you think –”

“You’re a liar, and you always have been,” Scrimgeour snapped. “Serves you well, but I know better. Get out – please.”

Cassane’s eyes flashed, but tossing a few coins on the counter, he hefted the bottles and Disapparated with a crack.

“Now we can speak candidly,” Scrimgeour said, drawing his wand and a few pieces of parchment, “without... interference.”

“I thought you and Cassane were on the same side.”

Scrimgeour’s eyes flashed. “There are things I’d rather Nathan Cassane does not know, thank you very much – much like there are things I’d rather you didn’t know either.”

“Well, we can’t change that, now, can we?” Harry replied with a shrug, drawing his own wand. “Well, what do you want?”

“Probably something very similar to what you want,” Scrimgeour said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Answers.”

“An exchange, then, as before?” Harry said, a cool smile spreading across his face. “I give you what you want, you give me what I want. Everybody wins.”

“Well, with the mild exception that you’re in no position to be demanded anything, I’m interested in what you might want,” Scrimgeour replied.

“Access to the international journalists that Fudge is keeping sequestered until he can give a complete statement declaring war against Dumbledore –”

“It’s not going to happen,” Scrimgeour interrupted. “Fudge or members of his little ‘cabinet’ have been meeting with them daily, easing the way for his big announcement. He’s not going to let you or Dumbledore anywhere near them.”

“I said ‘access’,” Harry replied evenly. “Not necessarily legitimate.”

“The law is there for a reason, Potter, and I’m not about to break it,” Scrimgeour said flatly.

Harry gritted his teeth, but he had expected this. “Fine, then if we plan to work within the law, I want Barnabus Cuffe arrested for violation of contract and extortion.”

Scrimgeour’s eyebrows rose slightly, but his scarred face betrayed nothing. “Excuse me?”

“The articles he published in the Daily Prophet were not what Dumbledore requested, and that’s a breach of contract – not to mention the fact he used blatant extortion to raise the price of the pieces.”

“From the sounds of Cuffe’s ranting, Dumbledore double-crossed him,” Scrimgeour said, interest growing in his expression. “But that fat fool has been... irritating for a long time, so I will only say that I am interested. But why do you want this?”

“Cuffe’s not an idiot,” Harry said after a few seconds of thought. “From what I’ve been told, he worked too hard to get his position to lose it and his fortune in the courts. He’ll want to settle, and from that position of weakness, we give him what we agreed: a full statement, from Dumbledore and I, regarding everything.” And if that doesn’t work, Skeeter could always sneak Fleur’s statement into the Prophet

while Cuffe's arrested – it won't be as effective, but it could work, and Scrimgeour doesn't need to know about that...

"Everything?"

"The Ollivanders' attack, the Sirius Black complications, and the fight at Hogwarts," Harry said, ticking off the options on his fingers. "I was framed, and Umbridge ran with what she saw."

"From what she's told me –"

"You know I could never have orchestrated something like that, nor would I have reason to," Harry finished, "if Umbridge has told the truth."

"I've correlated her responses with those of my people, and she wasn't lying," Scrimgeour replied curtly, "but your abilities... well, assumptions are dangerous in this world."

"Right," Harry said, slightly uneasily, "well, I'll give the statement, with Veritaserum if I have to –"

"It would be irrelevant," Scrimgeour replied coldly. "Veritaserum confessions are inadmissible in a court of law, I thought you knew that. Resistances, allergies, and other... legal... principles make such confessions worthless – the First War proved that."

"Fine," Harry snapped, "a regular statement, then. The international journalists will see the copies of the Prophet, and they'll have second thoughts. They'll start asking questions, and that's all we'll need. They'll be looking for Dumbledore to give the other side of the story –"

"And when they discover the truth, it stands that there is a very good chance civil war will be averted," Scrimgeour continued, looking at Harry with a new expression – not quite admiration, but not quite surprise either. "Fudge will be humiliated –"

“He’ll be thrown out of office, and you’ll get what you want,” Harry finished. “And as we agreed, your campaign will have my vote.”

“This entire plan rests upon Cuffe getting arrested and cutting a deal,” Scrimgeour said after a few seconds of thought. “What if he takes it to court, and gains the same sort of ‘sentence’ you received last time? Not to mention that Fudge will attempt to block any article or editorial such as what you are suggesting.”

“That’s if he can,” Harry replied coolly. “We have some allies in the Wizengamot, and I’m sure Cuffe has made plenty of enemies. And if all else fails... well, the Prophet isn’t the only communication medium in our world. The Quibbler, or perhaps –”

“A radio broadcast, on the WWN,” Scrimgeour said suddenly. “An live interview. There will be those who don’t believe or won’t hear it, and it’s unlikely that the international journalists will hear it, but there’s a chance –”

“If Fudge doesn’t order a raid to shut it down, there could be a chance,” Harry finished, his face lighting up. “It could work...”

“Of course, this is all based upon the assumption,” Scrimgeour said icily, “that you are not lying to me. That you will not lie to me. I only agree to this if I get answers.”

Harry glanced over at Tonks. Her face was impassive, but he got the gist of what she was trying to say with her eyes and changing hair colour to a muted grey-black: you asked for this.

“I... likely won’t have all the answers you are looking for,” Harry said carefully.

“Undoubtedly,” Scrimgeour replied icily. “but you’ll be willing to give them, unlike others.”

Dumbledore’s unspoken name weighed heavy in the room, and Harry took a deep breath. “He doesn’t have all the answers either.”

“Perhaps, but you and I think on a similar wavelength,” Scrimgeour retorted, “and you’re far more willing to cooperate as equals, if we can say that. So I’ll start with the questions: what happened to those girls?”

“I have... I have a few ideas, but I’ll need proof before I can say anymore,” Harry replied hesitantly, swallowing hard.

“Will they recover?”

Harry let out a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I doubt it.”

Scrimgeour swore softly and made a motion as if to get to his feet, but a second later, he looked back at Harry.

“What were their ties to you?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. Tonks coughed quietly in the background, and Harry tried to ignore her, focusing only on Scrimgeour’s intent face.

“I... I liked Cho Chang, last year,” he admitted. “We never really socialized, though – I only saw her on the Quidditch pitch. Su Li was in my year, but she wasn’t social, so I really don’t know much about her. The other two girls.... they were younger and weren’t in my house, I never paid any attention to them.”

“Do you think it is ‘just a coincidence’ that the attacker chose four Asian girls?” Scrimgeour pursued, his eyes glittering.

“I don’t... really think so,” Harry said after a few seconds of thought. “I think there’s more to be thought of that they’re all Ravenclaws rather than anything else.”

“Really?” The skepticism was clear in Scrimgeour’s voice.

“It was a blood magic ritual of some kind, Dumbledore and I figured that out, and that kind of magic requires intelligence,” Harry said

tersely. "I don't think members of any other house could have pulled it off –"

"But why would they do something so dangerous, so self-destructive? And why would they blame you for all of it?"

Harry took a deep breath, and threw another look at Tonks. "Because I suspect those girls were possessed by something that forced them to do it – and the fact that Su Li was at least sane enough to give me a clue suggests that she resisted it the most."

"Possession?" Scrimgeour demanded sharply. "By what? There are no malevolent ghosts in Hogwarts –"

Harry could see Tonks swear silently, and he knew that she understood. But I'm still missing something...

Suddenly, a very peculiar – and sharply familiar scent caught Harry's nose: the smell of smoke and burning rubber.

Scrimgeour was on his feet, and pointing his wand at the door, the frame suddenly glowing a burning red. "What the –"

"Get down!"

Harry could only dive beneath the table – a table Scrimgeour flipped a moment later, nearly clipping Harry's legs – as the roar of flames blew the door clean off its hinges.

* * *

Kemester yanked himself away from Snape and leveled his wand at the figure in the doorway.

"I thought I told you –"

The figure's cane tapped twice against the ground, and Snape could not help but feel a rush of surprise at the man's voice.

“Mr. Kemester, when the time comes that I begin listening to your commands, I will inform you,” Lucius Malfoy said smoothly, drawing his own wand smoothing from its hidden location in the cane and pointing it at Snape’s restraints. There was a flash and Snape pulled himself free, gingerly trying not to move his fingers more than he had to.

“You can’t take him out of here!” Kemester snarled. “You can’t just –”

“His presence in this infirmary jeopardizes an entire operation, and I cannot afford for him to be contained in this location any further,” Lucius said briskly.

“We made a deal.” Kemester’s eyes blazed with fury, and Snape could hardly restrain a snort. And he expected Lucius Malfoy to uphold a deal? He’s more naïve than even I imagined...

“A deal that said absolutely nothing about Snape staying here,” Lucius retorted, grabbing Snape’s arm roughly and pulling him into a sitting position. “And besides, you still have not provided what we agreed upon –”

“I sent the dossier to your accountant before everything went to hell,” Kemester spat. “Everything that you need is there, including the legal precedents –”

“Good,” Lucius replied primly. “I’ll have Yarone process the paperwork.”

“And the goblins?”

“We already have a scapegoat, and it’ll be a rude surprise for him indeed,” Lucius said, a cruel grin rising on his face as he drew another wand from the pocket of his black robes. Snape recognized it instantly.

“My wand, Lucius.”

“In a moment, Snape. Kemester, one last question: why you torturing one of my friends?” Malfoy’s voice was abruptly cold. “It looks like Snape’s hands are rather damaged.”

“Only six broken fingers,” Kemester replied through gritted teeth. “Nothing you can’t handle.”

“I’m not a healer, Kemester,” Lucius said icily, already pointing his wand at Snape’s broken fingers. A muttered word, and Snape felt the bones in his hands crunch sickeningly. The pain, however, seemed slightly muted, enough that he could curl his fingers around his wand.

“You get the job done,” Kemester growled.

“Of course I do, but if others learned of your actions...”

“And what of yours?”

Lucius abruptly stiffened. “What did you say?”

“I’m not an idiot, Malfoy,” Kemester snarled, raising his own wand, “and I’m better at pattern recognition than most of our kind. So let’s bargain: you keep your mouth shut, and I won’t tell Amelia Bones that you were at the Zabini manor when Aphrodite Zabini was killed.”

For one of the first times in Snape’s life, he saw raw fury cross Lucius Malfoy’s face. “You dare threaten me?”

“Do we have a deal?” Kemester retorted.

The two men matched glares, but before Snape could say a word, Lucius had spun on his heel and stormed out the room, his cane a rhythmic hard tap against the stone.

“The bastard thinks he can threaten me —”

“You don’t need him alive,” Snape said coolly, moving beside Lucius.

“If that were only true,” Lucius replied, his knuckles white as he gripped the head of his cane. “Nevertheless, Kemester will serve his purpose, and like it or not, he and I are allies.”

“Allies?” Snape hissed, looking back at the door behind them. “You’re using him –”

“As he uses me,” Lucius spat. “That’s all an alliance ever is. Both of us have skills the other requires... and both of us are united in purpose.”

Snape gritted his teeth as he heard the door slam behind him, already envisioning in his mind the look on Harry Potter’s face when Lucius’ plan would be put into effect.

“Revenge.”

“Exactly.”

* * *

Harry didn’t even see the first curses streak over the table where he and Scrimgeour had taken cover, but he could hear the sounds of exploding bottles. It’s too fast, the door hasn’t even –

It hit the wooden table with a shuddering crack, and Harry ducked low as shards of flaming wood peppered the bar, lodging in the dirt and in the rickety chairs.

“We need better cover!” Scrimgeour shouted. “Tonks, now!”

The pink-haired Auror was a blur, her wand spraying light against the floor. Tables toppled over, as if an invisible hand had flipped them on their sides. Harry’s eyes widened as Scrimgeour moved with unnatural speed, his wand hardly visible as he muttered spell after spell. He heard a rattle, and he could only watch in astonishment as a dozen chairs rose into the air, their legs angled sideways towards the door...

“Incendio!”

Harry scrambled back as the spell whistled through the door, igniting his makeshift barricade. Blinking back tears from the smoke already starting to fill the bar, he could see figures already rushing through the narrow opening, spells searing through the air –

“Depulso!” Scrimgeour roared. With a single shivering rattle, every single chair shot towards the door in a flurry of flying wood –

“Protego!”

“Scuti fractus!”

Harry could only watch in amazement as Tonks’ spell hit the erupting Shield Charm, shattering it in seconds. The hooded caster could only look up with alarm as three chairs smashed into him, sending him tumbling into the street. But the other two figures were moving, and Harry just barely got a Shield Charm up in time. He felt his wand vibrate sickeningly in his hands as the charm shuddered, but held against the cascade of magic...

“Don’t just cower and shield, Potter, they’re after you!” Scrimgeour yelled, deflecting a curse with a slash of his wand.

In that second, Harry knew that Scrimgeour had made a terrible mistake, as realization hit him like a heavy boot to the gut. They weren’t after me before... they tracked Cassane, they were after him! But not anymore...

Dodging a white-hot hex that scorched its way clean through the bar, Harry stumbled behind another flipped table and peeked over the edge. The smoke was making it hard to see, but he could only see two cloaked figures attacking them – and for a few brief seconds, it didn’t look as if they knew where he was...

He slid closer to the wall and raised his wand, pointing it at the closest table to one of the attackers. I’ve only got one shot at this...

“Duro! Vercundus!”

The hooded figure – a rather squat figure, Harry couldn’t tell much more – didn’t even see the table moving, struck by Harry’s spell. Skidding across the slick floor, the heavy wooden table hit the person at full speed – and kept moving, slamming her with a sickening crunch into the stone wall. Harry couldn’t help but wince at the sound of the impact. But he wasn’t done yet.

“Incendio!”

The figure began to scream as the table crushing her against the wall erupted into flames, and for a moment, Harry’s blood ran cold. It didn’t last long, though – the other figure was still launching spells, and Harry nearly avoided something red-hot streaking by his neck.

“It’s three on one, fool!” Scrimgeour shouted through the smoke. “Throw down your wand, and I might let you live!”

CRACK.

He suddenly felt the tip of a wand pressing against his throat, held with a delicate hand.

“You let us leave freely, and I won’t have Potter’s brains sprayed all over these walls –”

Harry’s foot snapped up, catching her hard between the legs. He felt her grip loosen, and he spun, raising his elbow high –

The young woman’s hood flew free, and Harry would have even considered the girl attractive if she wasn’t trying to kill him and he hadn’t just backhanded her across the face. She staggered backwards a step, but a second later she sprawled on the floor, victim of a chair that Tonks had sent magically flying across the room –

“Tonks, get rid of those fires!” Scrimgeour shouted above the screaming still echoing across the room. “Potter, take her wand and –”

But she was already moving, her wand not rising to meet Harry’s but moving towards her own arm –

“Avada Kedavra!”

There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and a second later, the woman flopped to the floor, her eyes lifeless.

Harry looked around wildly, only to see Scrimgeour lower his wand, a dark look on his face, and a strangely flat look in his eyes.

“You –”

“They communicate through the Mark,” Scrimgeour spat, stepping over the shattered glass and broken wood. He rolled the body over with a shove of his foot and sliced open the sleeve on her robes – to reveal a swirling, blood-red tattoo. “More of Black’s ex-Death Eater friends, no doubt.”

Harry looked quickly at Scrimgeour. “You know it’s not him –”

“Harry, get over here!” Tonks shouted. “I need you to dispel this Hardening Charm you used!”

“I’m sure you could handle –”

Tonks grabbed Harry’s sleeve and pulled him close. “Do you want that girl’s body?” she whispered quickly. “Scrimgeour will have other things on his mind –”

“Do it,” Harry replied quickly, thinking as fast as he could. He had considered finding a second simulacrum – and it was a golden opportunity. “What about this one?”

“She’s lucky to be alive,” Tonks whispered back, magically shoving the table back to reveal an unconscious, badly burned woman, older and much uglier, the look of shock and pain frozen on her face. “And she’s a Death Eater, that’s for damned sure –”

“Do you have an ID on that one yet?” Scrimgeour said grimly, a small jet of water spraying out of his wand and extinguishing one of the larger flaming piles of debris.

“Looks like Alecko Carrow, sir,” Tonks replied carefully. “Ex-Death Eater, brother is –”

“I know who she is,” Scrimgeour said, looking down upon the woman, a cold smile upon his face. “She got away from justice once – but not again. What about the one outside?”

“Disappeared already, from the looks of things –”

Scrimgeour swore. “I thought you jinxed him before he could –”

Tonks visibly fumed. “I was busier trying to prevent us from being killed than –”

“Forget it,” Scrimgeour cut her off, coughing once in the smoky room as he extinguished another fire with a pungent hiss. “What’s done is done.”

Harry could suddenly smell the reek of charred flesh, and he felt his stomach churning. “What about this Carrow woman, and that other one –”

“Take the dead girl in the back to the Auror morgue, and for Merlin’s sake, try to be discreet – the last thing we need is the Prophet to find out about this now,” Scrimgeour ordered curtly, his eyes fixed on Tonks. “I’ll have another group come along to pick up Carrow –”

“With all respect, Rufus, I would like to ask her a few questions first.”

Harry spun around and nearly stumbled on the still slick floor as Albus Dumbledore entered the room, wearing midnight blue robes and a very grim expression upon his face.

“Well it’s about damn time you showed up!” Scrimgeour said angrily.

“Where is Aberforth?” Dumbledore asked, completely ignoring Scrimgeour’s rising anger, his eyes landing on Harry.

“I paid him off so we could have some privacy – something we really didn’t get! We could have used you five minutes ago, Dumbledore!” Scrimgeour snarled, furiously gesturing for Tonks to get moving. “This place was attacked –”

“I can see that.”

“- By three of Black’s goons!” Scrimgeour finished hotly. “You should have been here fifteen minutes ago! That was our deal, where the hell were you? I didn’t think you sent Potter in your place!”

Dumbledore frowned. “Right on time, Rufus, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I Apparated from the gates of Hogwarts at quarter past three –”

“It’s three-thirty, Dumbledore!” Scrimgeour said furiously, his yellowy eyes blazing. “And now someone’s dead, because you were late.”

“You were the one who killed her!” Harry said angrily.

“Well, it wasn’t like you were going to, now, was it?” Scrimgeour snarled, rounding on Harry. “That’s the way war works, Potter!”

“Rufus, we cannot meet here, people are already coming to investigate the smoke and the noise,” Dumbledore said, his shrewd eyes darting across the damaged bar. The old man raised his wand, and with a massive sweeping motion, every single table and chair righted itself. Shattered bottles leapt back onto the shelves, and even the thick haze of smoke that filled the room seemed to fade away.

“You must leave, and leave quickly. I’ll take Harry back to Hogwarts –”

“Professor, not yet.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry very quickly, and he had the unnerving feeling that he was being x-rayed by those bright blue eyes.

“Harry, this isn’t safe –”

“I have one thing I want to handle first, then I’ll get back,” Harry lied, throwing a quick glance at Scrimgeour. The Head Auror gave Potter a small, almost imperceptible nod in return. But Harry knew that Dumbledore had noticed the glance, and the old man’s expression hardened, if only for a moment.

“Harry, be quick, I have the feeling that time,” he said softly, tapping his strange golden watch, “may be running out. Please come to my office as soon as you return – we may have some answers.”

“Answers?” Scrimgeour said suddenly, his eyes lighting up. “Well, what are you waiting –”

CRACK.

“Oh, for the love of fucking magic!” Scrimgeour exploded, slamming his fist on the table. “We don’t have time to –”

“Mr. Scrimgeour, you’re right: we don’t have time,” Harry interrupted, sliding away his wand. A quick look under the table found him the book Cassane had given him, amazingly still undamaged. “Dumbledore probably doesn’t want to risk it –”

“I know how he operates, Potter,” Scrimgeour growled.

“Then you should know he’d want to tell you, if anyone!” Harry retorted. “I can’t believe I’m defending Dumbledore here, but it’s too dangerous right now, and you and he both know that. And if I know

Dumbledore, he didn't intend to be late – something must have gone wrong.”

“And what do you think that was?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” Harry snapped, as Tonks reappeared in the room, immediately Disapparating a second later. “Look, I'll pass along anything I hear, if you adhere to the deal I suggested.”

“I want information,” Scrimgeour said immediately, his eyes blazing. “I want to be kept in the loop. If you want my trust, you'll have to earn it, Potter. And I'll be in touch.”

He took a firm hold on Carrow's unconscious figure, pulling it into a rough sitting position and a departing glare, the Head Auror Disapparated with a crack.

A second later, Harry looked around. “Tonks!” he called out into the open bar. “You can come out now –”

“Not here, around the back!”

He followed behind her towards a small shed that smelt strongly of manure. He wrinkled his nose, but Tonks waved her wand and a blast of fresh air filled the space between them.

“Where did you bring the body?”

“The morgue, what do you think?” Tonks replied, running a slightly shaking hand through her hair. “Needs to be entered into the records first, then I'll get it out.”

“They weren't here for me,” Harry whispered after a few seconds. “They were looking for Cassane – and Merlin only knows where he went.”

“He's unreliable, I told you that from the beginning,” Tonks replied tersely. “So where do you want to do the ritual? You'll be out for a few days –”

“Not in Hogwarts,” Harry replied immediately. “That strange magical... thing that surrounded Hogwarts happened the night we did the ritual, and with something evil loose in Hogwarts, I can’t afford to be possessed or... or something happen to me.”

“Then where?” Tonks asked simply. “And that’s not the only thing – this won’t be cheap either.”

Harry swore under his breath as he pulled whatever coins he had left from his pockets and into Tonks’ hands. “The sooner I get good relations with the goblins, the better – that way I’ll actually be able to get my money.”

“Harry, this isn’t enough –”

“I know, I know, just... cover me just this once, Tonks,” Harry said, breathing fast, his gut clenching. “We can’t afford to wait. Do you think you can get the body ready?”

“Harry, I can do it – it’ll mean a few more sleepless nights, but it’s not like I’m sleeping much these days anyway – I just need to know where,” Tonks said intently. “Not at Hogwarts, and Grimmauld Place is out –”

“Fine, the Shrieking Shack, then,” Harry said, his breath hitching as his thoughts whirled. “There are no ghosts there, it was just Lupin years ago.”

“You’ll need to explain it to Dumbledore, a reason why you’re leaving.”

Harry sighed with exasperation. “I’ll figure something out, Tonks. And by the way, when you do those diagnostic spells, try and get a look at that Dark Mark – we don’t want any of its magic fouling up the ritual.”

“Harry...” Tonks raised her hands helplessly. “Look, I learned a lot the last time we did this, and if anything, the most important thing was

that I don't have a damned clue about everything in this ritual! I can't promise anything."

Harry let out a breath, a sudden wave of tiredness surging through him. "I know, I know... I'm sorry, it's just..."

"I know," Tonks replied, hesitantly putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Hell, even I didn't expect Scrimgeour to be that ruthless. Can't say I'm surprised, but..."

"He's gambling with high stakes, like both of us," Harry muttered. "At least I'm getting better –"

"It was a nice trick with that table," Tonks said, a small grin appearing on her face. "Caught between two stone walls, right?"

"If one of the walls could be on fire, sure," Harry replied with a shrug. "Hell, that Hardening Charm was off that list you gave me – surprisingly easy to cast, though."

"Limited in use," Tonks replied, her hand sliding to Harry's other shoulder, so her entire arm was across his back. "But damned useful at the right time. I'll have to remember that trick."

"Thanks."

"So..." Tonks' other hand suddenly began playfully sliding up Harry's side. "Is that the only thing that charm can harden?"

"Well, I haven't –"

His words were cut off – Tonks' other arm had snaked around him, and she was kissing him deeply, hungrily, cutting Harry's words and rational thought in twain...

She broke the kiss first, a strangely satisfied smile on her face. "Interesting."

Harry struggled for words, as his mind struggled to catch up with the past few seconds. “Tonks, you just –”

“You’re getting better, I think,” she mused, tapping her chin. Then an insufferable smile came to her lips as she gestured downwards. “And I’ve just proven one place where you won’t need a Hardening Charm any time soon.”

“Tonks!”

* * *

He watched from the shadows, back behind the trees. They hadn’t even bothered to look – they had relied on seclusion to protect them.

But they had been wrong, and he had heard every word. When he saw them kiss, a twisted smile crossed his handsome face – that was new.

“A ritual... in the Shrieking Shack,” Sirius Black whispered to himself. “Heh... they didn’t tell me all about this before they left... must be new...”

The smile on his face grew wider, and an insane light lit his eyes. “The Dark Lord will want to know... ah, but I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Author's Note: I know it has been an uncharacteristically long time for this update, but here it is, the longest chapter thus far in this fic. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“So he just left?”

“Don’t sound so damned incredulous, Blaise, he had no choice,” Draco Malfoy said with irritation, slamming his book shut. “From what my father’s told me, your Mark burns, you go.”

“He didn’t come back, though.”

“Maybe he’s on a mission – look, how the hell would I know where Snape is?” Malfoy snapped. “I’m not his keeper!”

“I just think that if he’s supposed to be undercover here, it’s damned inconvenient for all of us that he doesn’t show up to his classes this afternoon!” Zabini retorted. “Dumbledore’ll know –”

“And if the rumors are true, Dumbledore’s got Snape on retainer, so he undoubtedly has some kind of answer,” Malfoy grumbled. “Frankly, I wouldn’t mind knowing where he is.”

“Look, we both know he doesn’t know enough –”

“I don’t know how much Snape does or doesn’t know!” Malfoy exploded, slamming his fist on the desk. “He wants to be kept in the loop so he can protect us, but what if he’s captured? If he gives something away, the fingers point back to us!”

Zabini grabbed Malfoy’s wrist and looked at him intently. “Then we make sure we point the finger where it belongs – and that’s firmly at Nott. He’s the one who’s running this whole mission –”

“And don’t you forget it.”

Both Malfoy and Zabini looked up to see Nott swagger up to the table, a supremely self-satisfied look on his face. His eyes, though, were still mirror-like and hard as steel.

“We have,” the weedy young man said slowly, pulling a small envelope from his robes, “new orders.”

Zabini’s eyes narrowed. “That’s quick.”

“Too quick,” Malfoy growled. “What’s the orders?”

Nott leaned close, and Malfoy could see the familiar unnatural gleam in the young man’s eyes. “We’re going to give Potter a taste of the horrors the Dark Lord has planned for him. Tonight.”

“Tonight?” Malfoy exclaimed incredulously, swiping the letter from Nott’s hand. “Nott, there’s no way the Dark Lord wants us to –”

Nott snatched the letter from Malfoy’s grasp and shoved it back within his robes. “I’m sorry, Draco, but it’s for Marked Death Eaters only – and you’re not one of them.”

Malfoy shot to his feet and grabbed Nott by the collar, his eyes blazing with indignity and fury. “I’ve just about had it with you, you insufferable piece of –”

“What, Malfoy, you can’t handle the fact that suddenly you’re not the most important person in the room anymore?” Nott replied, his twisted grin filled with satisfaction. “In fact, these orders specifically mention your role in this operation.”

Malfoy tensed. “What?”

Nott’s eyes twinkled with malice. “You’re the scapegoat.”

“That’s a fucking lie!”

“Oh, is it?” Nott shot back. “I think you’ll find that, once again, you’re wrong. The job’s mine, and I’m looking forward to making Potter suffer. But don’t worry, Draco, you’ll be able to take all the credit for my hard work – just like you wanted.”

Malfoy froze. Suddenly, Snape's words were vivid in his mind: the one wizard in your year who is capable of murder....

Nott's smile grew larger by the second. "Oh, what's the matter, Draco, are you scared Potter's going to come and fry your balls the same way he fried your father's?"

"You little –"

"All right, stop," Zabini snarled, getting to his feet and yanking Nott free of Malfoy's grip. "You know what, I can actually see why the Dark Lord assigned me to work with you two – because both of you are fucking idiots! The only reason why I'm still here is because that rat-bastard Potter killed my mother, and I don't think he's suffered enough yet for his actions. I might prefer a bit of a more direct approach," he added, throwing a disgusted glare at Nott for a few seconds, "but if the Dark Lord is willing to provide me with resources and allies, then I'm certainly not going to be a fool and not use them!"

"Glad to know you have such a high opinion of yourself, Zabini."

"Shut up, you power-hungry little shit," Zabini snapped, turning to Nott with a plainly disgusted look on his face. "The only reason you're on this mission at all is because you know the magic to make this plan work. And the only reason you're on this mission," he continued, glaring at Malfoy, "is because your father has influence, you're halfway competent, and yes, you're the most obvious target. It's the perfect fucking decoy, I thought you understood that!"

"Clearly, Malfoy doesn't like being second best to anyone, even his betters," Nott said smugly.

"And don't you have a fucking job to do, or something?" Zabini returned angrily, rounding on Nott. "Why don't you go get off on your sick twisted fantasies and make Potter rue the day he was born?"

Nott threw Zabini a murderous glare, but he stormed off.

"He's going to try and kill you," Malfoy said quietly.

“He doesn’t dare countermand the Dark Lord’s orders, and he bloody knows it,” Zabini replied icily. “Now what the fuck is your deal? You knew what was going to happen the second you signed up for this.”

“I was supposed to be in –”

“No, you weren’t,” Zabini cut Malfoy off in mid-sentence. “Honestly, you didn’t expect that Nott was going to be the one running the show? Are you really that blind –”

“I knew it was going to happen, but forgive me if I’m a bit concerned about characters such as Potter having free run in this Merlin-forsaken school!” Malfoy snapped. “And with Snape gone, we can’t afford any mistakes that might give us away.”

“You can control that.”

“I can’t control Nott’s bloody lunacy!”

“You don’t control little fiends like Nott,” Zabini muttered, looking at the direction where the weedy Slytherin had left. “Sure, they seem docile, but they’re little fucking demons in disguise, and the Dark Lord’s exploiting that. And you and I both know we couldn’t – wouldn’t – do what he’s doing, am I right?”

Malfoy was silent, and Zabini snorted with exasperation.

“Glad to know we’re on the same page, then.”

* * *

“Come in, Harry.”

Harry tried to keep the tension out of his gait when he walked into Professor Dumbledore’s office, but it was difficult. His mind was working furiously, trying to process everything that had happened in only a few short hours. His head was literally aching from trying to fit

everything together – presuming it all fit together somehow. Too many factors, too many variables... damn it, why can't things be simpler?

"I think, from your expression, that you can understand why I gave you a Pensieve, Harry," Dumbledore said, looking up from a book on his desk. "As I told Miss Tonks, too much knowledge never makes for simple decisions."

"If I could make a decision, it would make things much easier!" Harry snapped, slumping in the chair closest to Dumbledore's oaken desk and putting his hand to his temple. "All I have right now are a bunch of 'facts' and ideas bouncing around. Hell, a coherent answer would make this all so much easier."

"It appears, then," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, looking back down at his desk and picking up a very delicate-looking rod, "that we have a similar quandary." The Headmaster prodded something carefully on his desk with the rod, producing a strange tinkling noise with every poke.

"Is that your watch?" Harry asked, frowning and leaning a bit closer, to see the Headmaster's watch partially disassembled upon the desk, with tiny screws and gears strewn around it.

"Indeed it is, Harry," Dumbledore replied with a frown of his own, giving the rod in his hand a slight twist as he prodded deeper within the mechanism. "It is enchanted to keep perfect time – in a manner of speaking – but for a reason that I do not, as of yet, understand, it appears to have slowed down. Yet when I arrived at the Hog's Head, it was showing the correct time."

"Does it, I don't know, need some sort of magical battery replaced?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "If magic came in batteries, Arthur Weasley would likely have a great many more working inventions than he already does. No, what is strange about this is that when I returned to Hogwarts, it appeared as though the watch had reset itself, going

backwards even to reflect a smaller time interval in which I was absent from Hogwarts.”

Harry raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Professor, that sounds impossible. Are you sure –”

“When a person’s life rode upon my arrival at the correct time, I feel that its importance cannot be overstated,” Dumbledore said grimly. “I can only hope that it is a problem with the mechanism itself, and not from an outside source.”

“As if we don’t have enough problems already,” Harry muttered, running a hand through his hair as he fought to push back the headache.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said, setting down the tool and sliding the half-assembled watch aside. “Did you learn anything new from Cassane?”

“He didn’t agree to help us, if that’s what you meant.”

“I didn’t expect that he would,” Dumbledore replied heavily, “but did you acquire any useful information?”

“I’ve got some ideas,” Harry said, a bit defensively. “Did you manage to find something?”

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Dumbledore said, his eyes sparkling as he pulled a small, rather battered book from the top of the pile on the edge of his desk. Then, drawing his wand, he pointed it at another book wedged into the shelf. The book, bound in dull crimson leather, glided through the air and landed with a heavy thud on the center of the desk.

“That’s a blood magic book,” Harry said sharply, immediately spotting the thin, razor-edged blades between the covers.

“Indeed it is, and one of a collection a Headmaster acquired in the early nineteenth century,” Dumbledore replied, giving Harry a

penetrating stare as he opened the book with a wave of his wand. "You see, Cassane's mention of vampires was enough for me to remember Abraham Stoker's biggest accomplishment – the Muggle novel *Dracula*, an interesting treatise that began an obsession with vampires that carries over in Muggle culture to this day. What is considerably more interesting is the fact that such a cultural phenomenon occurred within the wizarding world nearly a hundred years earlier – and with considerably more bloodshed."

"Yeah, Cassane mentioned that the vampires started leaking phony magical rituals that only boosted their own power," Harry said slowly. "He had a book like that one, too –"

"Likely from the same collection," Dumbledore said with a nod. "One of the old vampire 'lords' was particularly prolific with his work, and he produced many volumes filled with these rituals. In any case, I was able to find a ritual described in this work that is nearly identical to the one that occurred with those poor girls." He tapped the page lightly with his wand, ignoring the faint rustling of the book's blades. "It is called 'Petals of the Nymph', reportedly able to give the users incredible beauty and sensuality."

Harry frowned. "Obviously not its true purpose."

"Most certainly not," Dumbledore agreed, reaching within his desk to pull out what looked like a large pink eraser. "Harry, this is a Revealer, one of the most interesting inventions to come out of the Department of Experimental Charms in the past ten years, and now sold commonly in Diagon Alley. Rub it hard on the page, like so, and..."

Harry let out a low whistle, for as the Revealer skidded across the page, directed by a few lazy flicks of Dumbledore's wand, it revealed line after line of black gothic writing within the margins of the page.

"I still can't read it, Professor."

"That is because it is in Russian," Dumbledore said solemnly, "a language I found fortuitous to learn about sixty years ago, when Grindelwald was gathering power on the continent. The true purpose

of the ritual still appears to enhance the beauty and sensuality of the users, but it also leeches blood and free will from the users at an alarming rate, directing it to the nearest vampire.”

“But I thought there aren’t any vampires in Hogwarts,” Harry said cautiously.

“There aren’t, and that is not the only thing that does not add up in this puzzle,” Dumbledore said, scanning the Russian text, his frown deepening. “There are also two essential components of the ritual which cannot be done without: the casters must use the magic of their own free will; and that the book –”

“Must be present,” Harry finished, his mind whirling. “It would have had to be there...”

“And yet it has not left my office,” Dumbledore said, closing the book and looking at Harry more intently than ever. “Not since it was removed from the Restricted Section in the early nineteenth century, according to this journal.” He tapped the small, battered book that he had selected earlier. “Each Headmaster keeps a record of what books are added to his personal library, and from where it came.”

“Wait a second!” Harry exclaimed suddenly. “You’re telling me that book was in the Hogwarts library prior to being up here? That’s insane, that book’s dangerous!”

“According to the journal, it was donated to the school anonymously,” Dumbledore said, his frown growing deeper as he consulted the journal. “Forgive me, Harry, but I do not hold a high opinion of this Headmaster – he likely made the decision without considering the consequences.”

“But why would he have made the decision to move it?” Harry asked, getting to his feet and glaring at the book. “Unless...”

It hit him, so suddenly he nearly staggered at the terrifying weight of the possibility and the implications. Of course... I was so close before...

He looked up at Dumbledore, and it seemed that the same understanding that had hit Harry had also made contact with the Headmaster as well.

“Unless this has happened before,” Harry whispered.

“There was no mention of it in the journal,” Dumbledore said, giving the journal a disgusted glance, “but I am not surprised. Most Headmasters would not want to leave such an embarrassing bit of information in a book that they know would be read by a future Headmaster.”

“Everything points to this ritual having happened before,” Harry said tersely, beginning to pace, “and there’s only one real way that the Ravenclaw girls would have found out about the book or the magic, not to mention being able to work the ritual without the book altogether.”

“They would have required help of some sort,” Dumbledore said slowly, his eyes meeting Harry’s. “And not a help they would have accepted voluntarily.”

“Moody was right all along!” Harry said, his voice getting faster and faster as he mentally kicked himself for not seeing it. “And we were so close too – we just didn’t make the connection with the source!”

“Possession,” Dumbledore finished, his eyes flashing. “And not by Lord Voldemort, but by the very perpetrators of the ritual all those years ago, in spiritual form.”

“It makes sense!” Harry exclaimed, pacing faster and faster. “Take the ghosts at Hogwarts – I know for a fact that Nearly-Headless Nick likes to reenact events from his past life – particularly surrounding his death! It’s a poignant moment for them – so why would it be so hard to believe that the ghosts of those girls possessed the Ravenclaws and forced them to redo the ritual! They wouldn’t have needed the book at all!”

Dumbledore did not respond, only drawing his wand. Pointing it at one of the delicate silver instruments on one of the spindly tables around the room, he muttered a few words. Instantly, the device began to whirl and click, sending tiny little puffs of smoke into the air... which formed the shape of two parallel circles: one a deep crimson red; the other a startlingly bright azure.

“Of course,” Dumbledore mused, a small hint of surprised satisfaction in his voice. “And the reason why those poor girls were driven to madness was not due to the possession, but due to the dichotomy of the ritual itself.”

Harry frowned. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Such a requirement as free will is a powerful restriction to place upon magic, Harry,” Dumbledore said, looking intently at the rotating circles of smoke, growing more pronounced with each whirl of the device. “An extremely powerful one, but one that can generate powerful conditions. The paradox of the possessing ghost having the free will to perpetrate the ritual and the Ravenclaw girls not having such a will would destroy both minds – the magical paradox would tear the two apart.”

“Then why did Su Li remain somewhat sane?”

“She must have begun to understand what the possessing ghost was attempting to do, and perhaps her own interests were more in line with the spirit than those of the other girls,” Dumbledore reasoned. “Either way, we cannot be sure.”

“Wait a second,” Harry said quickly. “Su was always in the library – hell, she was worse than Hermione – she must have recognized something about the ritual, recognizing that it was vampire blood magic –”

“And she warned you in a way that would allow you to come to understand the terrible history behind such magic,” Dumbledore finished, waving away the smoke. “A very smart girl.”

“Shame she couldn’t tell us who the ghost possessing her was,” Harry muttered, his pacing slowing as he looked back at Dumbledore. “Or where the ghost came from, or how the hell all that blood got on the walls.”

“A calling card, this we can be quite sure of,” Dumbledore said, his eyes scanning the bookshelves lining the walls as he raised his wand. “Something compelled the ghosts to leave those marks – something very powerful, and very Dark indeed. Possession, the stripping away of free will, is nearly always considered Dark magic, but compelling a ghost to possess another to relive its death is both Dark and exceedingly dangerous. Such malevolent spirits are extremely difficult to control.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call those possessing spirits evil,” Harry said hesitantly. “I mean, from the sounds of it, they were misguided more than anything, and if they were compelled, they didn’t have a choice either.”

“Agreed,” Dumbledore said, striding over to one of the far shelves and pulling two extremely thick books free. “And this means we are dealing with magic that has not been practiced in hundreds of years, and only once within Hogwarts, according to legend.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, cautiously sitting down.

Dumbledore placed the books upon his desk and pointed to a corner of his study with his wand. A second later, something black, patched, and very shapeless zoomed out of the shadow, landing neatly on one of the piles of books.

“The Sorting Hat?” Harry asked incredulously.

“It saved your life before, Harry,” Dumbledore said with a hint of a smile as he sat down. “And now, if my hypothesis is correct, it will tell us of what we need.”

“If only it was that easy, Professor Dumbledore,” the Sorting Hat said unexpectedly, with more than a hint of sadness. “And you are far from the first Headmaster to attempt this. Armando Dippet himself tried the tactic when the Chamber of Secrets was opened.”

“He wanted to see... if the Hat remembered anything from the time of the Founders,” Harry reasoned slowly. “But I thought Godric Gryffindor only put intelligence in the Hat for Sorting students, not of advanced Dark magic!”

“Mostly true, Mr. Potter,” the Hat said suddenly, the rip turning abruptly to face Harry, “except in this, I have a bit of knowledge. I could have known nothing about the construction or location of the Chamber of Secrets – that was entirely Salazar Slytherin’s project. But this... ah, it required all four Founders to work the magic.”

“What you are saying?” Harry asked cautiously. “Are you saying the Founders... I don’t know, that they somehow sealed something away that prevents this from happening?”

“Have you ever wondered, Harry, why there are no... malevolent ghosts within the castle of Hogwarts?” Dumbledore asked suddenly, fixing Harry with an intent stare.

Harry was slightly taken aback. “I... I hadn’t ever thought of it. But then again, Hogwarts is a school, right?”

“Like most of the rest of those who attend Hogwarts, Harry, you have never been forced to encounter what many would consider an evil spirit,” Dumbledore began slowly, “but that does not mean there has not been evil done at Hogwarts. No, there have been many terrible events within Hogwarts and which will never be mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*. This school has been around for nearly a millennium, and while such events may be rare, they are not unheard of. Take, for instance, the Triwizard Tournament – students have died in such events, and not all have died completing the Tasks.”

Harry swallowed hard at the implication. “Right...”

“People have died in this school, Harry,” Dumbledore said, his voice quiet and deadly serious. “And not all have died justly. And even if they have, those individuals may not have believed they have died for the right reasons. Those spirits linger in our world – and many are quite dangerous.”

“Then why don’t we ever see these ghosts?”

“Because the Founders predicted this possibility,” the Sorting Hat said suddenly. “And so they crafted powerful magic into the stones of Hogwarts, that any ghost with the intent to harm others would be sealed away within the depths of Hogwarts, unable to harm or endanger anyone.”

“And you think... you think whatever magic the Founders used... it might have been weakened?” Harry asked, a small surge of fear making his hands shake.

“It is the only hypothesis that explains why we have never seen those girls’ ghosts before now,” Dumbledore replied seriously. “And that is not all – such magic would have also sealed away the elements of personality that the active ghosts of Hogwarts do have that could harm the students.”

“The Founders were thorough,” the Hat agreed.

“Not thorough enough,” Harry snapped, rising to his feet. “Someone’s found that magic, and is destroying it!”

“Only weakening, I would think,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully, running a hand through his beard. “And without a great deal of skill, at that.”

“One of the three Death Eaters in the school,” Harry growled. “Voldemort has to be behind this – he causes chaos for us, so he can enact other plans!”

“That certainly seems the most likely possibility,” Dumbledore agreed. “The only question that remains is how he has weakened this binding magic...”

“Well, if the Founders hid something in the ‘depths of Hogwarts’, it’s probably in some sort of hidden room or something,” Harry said quickly, thinking aloud. “Like the Chamber of Secrets –”

“No,” the Sorting Hat said unexpectedly. “Most certainly not. If the legend is true, Slytherin wanted his Heir to find the Chamber – no Founder wanted the dangerous ghosts of Hogwarts to be unleashed. If there is some secret chamber, it is hidden far better.”

“And even I have not discovered all the secrets of Hogwarts, Harry,” Dumbledore finished. But despite his words, a bright fire was returning to his eyes.

“If Voldemort found this place, so can we,” Harry said, matching Dumbledore’s expression. “And we can’t afford to waste time – with the Ministry the way it is, and with Voldemort on the move, we don’t have time to waste. We need to find those Death Eaters in Hogwarts and get them out of here.”

His eyes narrowed. “And that includes Snape.”

“Professor Snape, Harry, but I fear that choice has been taken out of our hands,” Dumbledore replied, rising to his feet. “He was apprehended by the Ministry a few hours ago – the Floo Network is being watched.”

“So that leaves two...” A sudden thought struck Harry. “Professor, we’re forgetting about Peeves. He went... evil before any of the other ghosts –”

“Peeves is a poltergeist, Harry,” Dumbledore said, opening the first heavy book he had pulled down and scanning it closely. “Different rules apply – and thankfully for us, he is incapable of possession. An ability forfeited so he could manipulate physical objects.”

“But if the Founders’ magic breaks completely, would it be possible for Peeves to possess people?” Harry asked, swallowing hard as he remembered the impossibly insane expressions on the poltergeist’s ghostly face. “Merlin only knows what he was before...”

“I do not know, Harry,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes completely serious. “This magic is beyond both of our ken, and until we can find this mysterious chamber – if it even exists – we must concentrate our efforts on fending off any future attacks and identifying the culprit.”

“Cassane told me that there are some books on exorcism in the Hogwarts library –”

“Every professor will get one, and I will make sure you have one as well, Harry,” Dumbledore replied with a nod.

“Professor –”

Dumbledore looked up, and once again, Harry felt like he was being X-rayed by Dumbledore’s stare. But there was something else in the old man’s eyes – regret. Regret and something else Harry couldn’t quite recognize...

“I know you are keeping secrets from me, Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly, “and while I may not know all the facts of what has happened in the past few months, I know enough. I am concerned for your safety, Harry – things have happened far too quickly. I also know that you don’t trust me the same way you once did.”

“Things have to be mutual, Professor,” Harry replied, the small lump in his throat interfering with the coldness he was trying to keep in his tone. “You haven’t told me everything, and you have not let me get all the answers I need. So until that happens... things won’t be the same.”

“Perhaps not, but we share common ground, and Lord Voldemort views both of us as enemies,” Dumbledore replied calmly. “We do not have to completely trust each other to work together, and while each of us may do things that might offend the other –”

Like keep filth like Snape here, Harry thought darkly.

“- We can still fight on the same side,” Dumbledore finished. “Lord Voldemort is the greater evil, Harry, and I do not desire a parting of the ways between us.”

Harry considered this. Dumbledore knows more than he’s telling... but then again, he always has. And as an ally, I couldn’t ask for a better one. And... and it seems like he genuinely cares, and wants to make this work...

“I know you don’t agree with all of my methods,” he began slowly.

“If you knew the full extent of mine, you would likely disagree with them as well,” Dumbledore replied fairly. “And as neither of us knows the whole about the other, and given our current time constraints and predicaments, it is wise not to draw conclusions.”

I’m still not telling him about simulamancy, Harry thought to himself. That’s... well, it’s too close to whatever the hell is happening at Hogwarts right now, and I still don’t know if you can consider it Dark or not...

“Fine,” Harry said finally after a few moments of silence. “Does this mean I’m a honorary member of the Order of the Phoenix or something?”

“Not yet, Harry, but you will kept informed,” Dumbledore replied. “I can promise that.”

“You won’t tell me everything, though.”

“ And vice-versa,” Dumbledore returned. “Although,” he added, “you’ve already been quite effective in starting your own little... circle, so to speak.”

Harry could barely hold back his tension. He either knows something... or he's just extraordinarily good at guessing. Knowing him, probably both.

* * *

There were four of them who sat around the ornate mahogany table, a table spotlessly clean other than the rims from the glasses of water upon the desk.

"You could have at least brought a bottle for this discussion, Mr. Malfoy," a portly, bespectacled man said regretfully, holding up his glass regretfully with fat, slightly misshapen fingers.

"I don't drink when I do business, Yarone," Lucius Malfoy growled, drumming his fingers upon the table. "Not even wine – besides, one requires a clear head for this sort of business."

Considering how complex and convoluted it is, Snape thought darkly from his position at the end of the table, a glass of wine would probably help...

"Is there, ah, a reason Mr. Snape is here, Lucius?" Willard Parkinson asked, his squinty eyes narrowing with distaste. The man was startling handsome for his fifty-three years, a definite asset when it came to his role as Malfoy's personal legal consultant and joint owner of Parkinson & Baddock, but his personality was abrasive at best and downright hostile at worst. He also loathed Snape with a passion.

"It would likely be best that Dumbledore does not know that Snape is out of Ministry custody at this time," Malfoy replied curtly. "The less that old fool knows, the better."

Yarone cleared his throat. "You do know that the bank has opted to remain strictly neutral in this conflict –"

“Yarone,” Malfoy said warningly. “This is a personal matter between me and the other party – the people in Gringotts who matter will not be drawn into this conflict.”

A crafty smile crawled onto Parkinson’s face, and Snape could barely hold back a grimace of revulsion.

“I will not tolerate murder in this conference room, Lucius,” Yarone said curtly.

“I’m sorry, I believed I hired you, not the other way around,” Malfoy replied coldly, draining his glass and setting it down with a hollow clink, “so if you don’t mind, I would prefer you did not dictate terms to me.”

“We are on Gringotts property, Malfoy!” Yarone said angrily, half-rising to his feet. “And that means you abide by our terms!”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed dangerously, but he said nothing, only refilling his glass of water with a wave of his wand.

“So it’s just Welmon we’re waiting for?” Parkinson asked impatiently.

“The goblins will likely send someone,” Yarone muttered.

Malfoy shot to his feet. “What?”

“Oh come on, Lucius, you didn’t think they knew?” Yarone retorted, rising to his own feet, although the effect was greatly diminished due to the man’s rotund shortness. “Of course they knew – they’ve been scanning every bit of mail that passes through our walls, trying to find any leaks. They knew about this plan before I did.”

“And you’re only telling me this now?” Malfoy said furiously.

“It’s not that important anyways,” Yarone replied dismissively. “Odds are, we’ll get a mid-level administrator who will soon realize he’s in over his head and dealing with customers who are sizably more powerful than he is. Thus, you get what you want.”

“That’s assuming they don’t call Ragnok,” Parkinson growled. “We know he’s negotiating with Dumbledore –”

“Even Fudge knows that, Parkinson,” Snape snapped. “But goblin business negotiation law guarantees a degree of protection even the Ministry dares not violate at the moment – and that we don’t dare violate either.”

“He’ll make our lives difficult, though,” Malfoy said tersely.

“Not for long,” Parkinson said coolly. He exchanged a glance with Yarone, who grinned greedily and rubbed his fat hands together.

“So you’ll be going through with that plan,” Malfoy said, a hint of surprise creeping into his tone.

“It’ll be just what the Ministry wants, and what we’ve all wanted for decades,” Yarone said, licking his heavy lips in a manner Snape found utterly repulsive. “Our money, our investments, in the hands of wizards, not wandless filth –”

The door opened, and before Yarone could utter another word, a man in an outdated grey suit sidled in, a very nervous expression upon his face.

“Welmon,” Parkinson said crisply. “You’re late.”

“If anything, I’m early,” Welmon replied quickly, sitting down next to Snape and folding his hands, if only to keep them from nervously twisting in his lap. “And you should be happy I showed up early – Ragnok’s coming.”

“Damn it,” Malfoy swore. “How much does he know?”

“If the right terminology is used –”

“The devilish bastard will still pick up on absolutely everything,” Yarone snapped. “He’s too smart for his own damned good. And you know that he’ll try and veto everything.”

Malfoy leveled his wand and pointed it at the door. “I think that he’ll be more... persuadable.”

* * *

Harry rubbed his temple wearily as he walked down the corridor. I need that damned Pensieve, just to clear my head...

“Harry? Harry!”

Harry closed his eyes and tried to blot out the high-pitched, annoying voice, but he could hear running footsteps behind him. He heard a soft meow, and a second later, he opened his eyes to see Mrs. Norris scampering away down the hall, darting around a pillar.

“Harry, can you help me? I mean, I know you’re busy and –”

“Not now, Colin,” Harry cut him off as Colin Creevey came into his view. He still found it hard to believe the Gryffindor was somehow a fourth year. And I faced the Horntail when I was his age...

“Why weren’t you at dinner, Harry?”

“Meeting with Dumbledore,” Harry replied brusquely, moving to shoulder past Colin. “And that’s exactly where I’m going –”

“Ron Weasley told me to come find you.”

Harry’s eyes snapped open, and for the first time, he met Colin’s eager gaze. “What does Ron want? Is he in trouble?”

“He just wants you to come to the Quidditch changing rooms as soon as you can,” Colin replied quickly. “Apparently it’s urgent.”

Harry swore under his breath. He had completely forgotten about Quidditch – but then again, he had had more important things on his mind. “I... damn it, I don’t have time for this...”

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Colin asked anxiously.

“Nothing, nothing,” Harry muttered. “Did Ron say what he wanted?”

“He just, uh, wanted someone to find you, and I volunteered,” Colin replied, shifting a bit uneasily. “Harry... people are saying some strange things about you –”

“I bet they are,” Harry said to himself. He looked at Colin penetratingly. “But from the look on your face, I’m guessing you don’t believe any of it.”

“Oh, heck no, Harry!” Colin said with a smile. “You saved my life, and you’ve been a real hero! I’m not gonna forget that!”

Harry could hardly restrain a shake of his head at the incredulity of it all. One of the few people that actually believed him was a person Harry couldn’t stand. Talk about bloody ironic...

“Is there anything else?” he asked, trying to inject some friendliness into his voice.

Colin shifted suddenly, and his face fell. He suddenly looked very scared. “Harry, have you seen my brother Dennis?”

“No, I haven’t,” Harry replied, slightly nonplussed at the question. His eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“I just haven’t seen him all day,” Colin replied nervously. “And... well, the other boys pick on him a bit, so I don’t know if he’s been pranked. Either way, I don’t know where he is – I didn’t see him when I went down to grab some dinner, and I’m a little worried.”

“I’m sure you’ll find him,” Harry said with a small smile. He almost wished that he could have the same cares that Colin Creevey did –

no goblin negotiations, no Ministry entanglements, no evil possessing ghosts, no Voldemort...

"Well, if you see him, can you let me know?" Colin asked anxiously.

"If I see him, I'll let you know," Harry replied with a nod. "Thanks, Colin."

He walked away, heading towards the stairs, all the while not noticing Mrs. Norris' lamp-like eyes resting on him, filled with the unnatural gleam of complete, paralyzed terror.

* * *

"Well, that went well," Lucius Malfoy said primly as he entered Yarone's office, his cane rhythmically tapping on the hardwood floor.

"As well as it could be expected," Snape replied curtly, folding his arms across his chest as he stood next to the fireplace. "I'm assuming I have leave to go now?"

Malfoy smirked. "Snape, you did a fine job, and I'm quite certain you will profit handsomely from all of this."

"You didn't answer my question," Snape said sharply. "Are we done here? Can I go back to Hogwarts?"

"You seem to be in a hurry –"

"The sooner I'm back at the school, the better," Snape said bitingly. "Dumbledore will have enough questions for me as it is, and the more I delay –"

"Make sure you don't give away too much, Snape," Malfoy said, his voice suddenly harsh. "I don't want certain parties finding out about this before it's far too late."

"And I don't need you telling me how to do my job," Snape snapped. "Anything else?"

“Other than not to take the Floo Network, that’s nearly it,” Malfoy replied, reaching into his robes. “I would prefer not to have to free you from the clutches of the Ministry again.”

Snape gritted his teeth. “And that note is?”

A small grin crept across Malfoy’s face as he extended the tiny, well-folded note towards Snape. “Give this to my son.”

“What is it?”

“Just some... instructions,” Malfoy said lightly.

“Instructions for what?”

“Just so we can have, ah, all the pieces back in the game.”

* * *

“There you are,” Ron said with an impatient huff. “I’ve been waiting for you –”

“I’ve had a very busy day, Ron,” Harry cut him off, rubbing his eyes. More than ever, he wanted to get to his Pensieve, unload his memories, and get some sleep. “You’ve had no idea...”

“You don’t look great,” Ron admitted. “Can you come inside?”

Harry’s curiosity was piqued – why on earth was Ron calling him all the way out onto the pitch for this? Rubbing his eyes again, he pulled open the door to the male end of the changing room, only to see Neville, Fred, and George leaning against the shelves.

“Well, the princess returns –”

“Fred, it’s still not funny,” Harry warned.

“Maybe to you it’s not,” George said with a snort. “I must say, Harry, your newest scent of smoke and charred wood is much more becoming.”

“Although I think I smell a trace of something else,” Fred added, a grin spreading across his face. “A little something feminine –”

Harry glared at them and turned to Ron. “What’s this all about?”

Ron shifted uneasily. “Well, you told me that I should... well, you know when I said that I wanted Umbridge gone, you told me that I should come up with my own plan to get rid of her?”

“Right...” Harry said cautiously.

“Well, we did,” Fred said cheerfully, “and now she’s gone.”

“I thought Dumbledore told you to get those fireworks,” Harry said with a frown. “At least that was my impression...”

“Nah, we volunteered for that,” George added. “Gave him the safe-word, though – damn shame he gave it to Professor Moody, though.”

“Anyways, once Umbridge was gone, I started thinking about what we could do to, you know, make sure the damage she did was mended,” Ron said, swallowing hard. “And she took a Weasley before she left.”

Harry understood in a second. “You want to bust Charlie out.”

“Dad already knows what we’re planning on doing, and he’s planning his exit strategy in case the Ministry tries to do something against him.” Ron took a deep breath. “And we’re trying to get Bill on our side too.”

“What about Percy?” Harry asked blankly.

Fred and George exchanged dangerous glares. "Let's just say," Fred began, "that when we see that arrogant, stick-up-the-arse brother of ours, he's going to get what he deserves."

"Percy signed off on the warrant for Charlie's arrest," Ron said in a low voice. "He's disowned the family, siding with the Ministry. Look, none of us want to go into details on that, but the fact remains is that Charlie's in Ministry custody, and we want to get him out."

"So we've been training," Neville finished brightly. "Ron picked up a decent bit of magic while he was helping you train for the Triwizard Tournament —"

"That's not going to be enough against Hit Wizards or Aurors —"

"And I might have nicked that list of spells I saw in your bag a bit ago," Ron mumbled.

Shock raced through Harry's veins, and he nearly grabbed the table. "When... but I thought —"

"You were asleep, and I didn't recognize any of the names," Ron said hastily, "so I figured they were new spells that you had found!"

"Ron, some of those spells are lethal!" Harry exclaimed. "Tell me you haven't been practicing them!"

"Only a few, and mostly on the chalkboards that Wood left here," Fred added with a smile, pointing at one of the massive boards on the wall. To Harry's shock, there were several holes the size of his fist in the board, and scorch marks all over the chalk rack.

"Problem is, a couple of the spells didn't seem to do much to the board," George finished with a shrug, "so we figured you might be able to help a bit."

"That's because some of those spells only affect humans!" Harry said exasperatedly. "Why didn't you take the pages with explanations of the spells?"

Ron winced, and Fred and George both rolled their eyes.

“Knew we were missing something...”

“Merlin, Ron, why didn’t you just ask me about it?” Harry asked, very real anger creeping into his voice – and he didn’t miss the hypocrisy of it all either.

“Harry, so much has happened so bloody fast... I would have asked you, but –”

“You’re just lucky that you haven’t been trying any of those spells on each other!” Harry exclaimed, silently cursing his own stupidity for leaving the paper visible. Thank Merlin Tonks has the simulamancy papers... the last thing I need right now is them knowing about that... “Some of those spells can kill!”

“Now Harry, a Levitation Charm can kill a man if it’s cast at the right time –”

“That’s not... that’s not the point, Fred!” Harry said with frustration, raking a hand through his hair as he sat on one of the old benches. “Some of those spells... you can kill someone easily with one of those, that’s the only purpose they have! And you’re all bloody crazy if you think you can easily get away with using them against trained Aurors and Hit Wizards!”

“You did,” Neville said quietly. “I saw you.”

Harry closed his eyes before looking up at Neville. “And take a good look at me, Neville. Why are you even here, anyways? You’re not a Weasley –”

“ Doesn’t mean I don’t care,” Neville interrupted defensively. “Doesn’t mean I don’t want to fight. Doesn’t mean I don’t admire what you’re doing, with Dumbledore.”

“Harry, you have to realize that we’d all be helping you if you’d let us,” Ron said angrily, “but you’re not. You won’t even tell me where you’re going, or who you’re working with!”

“And I’m not telling you for a reason, Ron!” Harry finished, rising to his feet and fixing Ron with a glare. “Do you really want to know what I’ve had to do in the past few weeks? Are you prepared to deal with people like Kemester, who will beat the living shit out of you if you stand in his way?” He took a deep breath. “Are you prepared to deal with the monsters that Voldemort’s unleashing in Hogwarts, that not even Dumbledore – not even Dumbledore – can trace?”

“You see, there’s a funny thing about that nebulous ‘unknown’,” George said after a couple seconds. “And that is that if you don’t know anything about it, how can you have justification to fear it?”

“Could be bad, sure,” Fred added, “but it could be great. Could be fantastic. Could be a game-breaker, even. It makes much more sense to fear something or someone that you know and deserves the fear, not something that you don’t know that you don’t know.”

“That... that makes no sense at all,” Harry said after a few seconds.

George looked crestfallen. “Really? It made sense to me –”

“George, let me ask you something, and we can toss the damn jokes out the window because what you’re planning to do is a hell of a lot more dangerous than starting a joke shop,” Harry said, walking straight up to the twins.

“Easy for you to say,” Fred muttered. “You haven’t met our mother.”

“Yes, I have, and that’s why I’m asking you this question,” Harry replied, taking a deep breath and looking into George’s eyes. “If you get into the Ministry, you’ll have to fight your way out, there’s no working around that. So I ask you this: can you kill?”

“What?”

“Can... you... kill?” Harry asked, clenching both hands into a fist. “If it was between his life – Charlie’s life – and that of a Hit Wizard or an Auror, could you kill them?”

Ron swallowed hard. “Harry, it won’t come to –”

“With the Ministry as it is, I can bet it will,” Harry said dangerously. “You too, Ron, Neville. Could you two kill if you had to? It’s not as easy as it might seem.”

“You couldn’t –”

“I have,” Harry growled. “And you really don’t want to know what it took to get me to that point. You lose something, Ron, something you’ll never get back. How do you justify it – how can you ever justify it? How can you tell your parents, your brothers or sisters, your grandparents? Fred, George, Ron, have you told Ginny what you’re going to do?”

“Are you crazy?” Fred replied incredulously. “Mum would kill us if she found out we were doing this, but we aren’t getting Ginny mixed up in this – it’s too dangerous, she’s already been through enough with that whole Chamber of Secrets thing.”

“Don’t think I don’t know, but do you plan to tell her?”

“Well, maybe when we’ve gotten Charlie out –” George reasoned.

“And what about you, Neville?” Harry continued, turning back to Neville, a hard look on his face. “Have you told your grandmother what you’re planning to do?”

“N-no, but I –”

“Well, after the way your parents went, she might want to know.”

Harry regretted the words the instant he said them: Neville's face went white as snow, and his breathing suddenly grew laboured, as if he was holding back something in his chest.

Ron looked at Harry with confusion. "Harry, what are you talking about?"

"My parents," Neville whispered, blinking rapidly, "were... were tortured with the Cruciatus Curse by ... by a bunch of Death Eaters after Y-you-Know-Who died. They were Aurors... and, and the D-Death Eaters thought they knew how h-he died..."

"Are... are they dead?" Fred asked tentatively. Neville couldn't answer, as he swallowed back tears. Ron threw a quick look at Harry, who only responded with a quick shake of his head.

"Shit," George whispered, sudden realization filling his voice. "That's why you flipped out on Malfoy the other day when said something about St. Mungo's – "

"And in fourth year, when Moody was showing the curses..." Ron's voice trailed off as a horrified look crossed his face. "Oh god, that's just... that's just..."

"Yeah," Harry agreed grimly. "Pretty fucking sick, if you ask me. So is that why you're doing it, Neville, going on this mission? Revenge? Living up to a legacy?"

Neville didn't respond, only looked at Harry. There was something in Neville's eyes that he couldn't quite recognize...

"If anything," Harry said finally, "Neville's the most ready for this, even if he's doing it for the wrong reasons."

Ron shifted uneasily. "So, will..."

"Will I what?" Harry asked sharply, turning to face Ron and trying to keep the scowl off his face. "Will I help you?"

“That’s it,” Fred said brightly. “Will you help us?”

Harry took a deep breath and began to pace, walking towards the damaged chalkboards, his mind whirling in a haze of tiredness...

Suddenly, he paused in front of one of the storage lockers, where a few extra practice brooms were always kept. He took a deep steadying breath as he slowly drew his wand. And I almost believed them...

“Who else knows?”

“Pardon?”

“I said who else knows what you’re doing here?” Harry asked quietly. “Who else have you told, Ron?”

Ron’s eyes went wide. “I haven’t said a word to anyone, Harry, you know –”

“Really?” Harry asked, flicking his wand at the locker door.

The door sprung open, and a cascade of old brooms fell onto the dirty floor – along with a very surprised, very disheveled Hermione Granger.

“So...” Harry began slowly, raising a hand with a beckoning gesture, a dangerous look appearing on his face, “why don’t you start explaining this – now.”

* * *

They were simple incantations, and it only took him moments to commit them to memory. Simple, inelegant, but singular in purpose, and brutally effective.

“Just like Harry,” Dumbledore murmured, closing the book with a snap and setting it down on his desk. “So much like Harry –”

CRACK.

His wand was out in a second and pointing at the shattered glass case containing Gryffindor's sword – and the hideously grinning apparition above it.

"Oops," Peeves said, his voice faintly mocking as he delivered an exaggerated bow. "My apologies, Headmaster."

"You are not permitted in this office, Peeves," Dumbledore said coolly, raising his wand. "Although that has not stopped you this year, has it?"

"I'm afraid, ah, not even the great Albus Dumbledore can tell Peeves where he can and cannot go," Peeves said with a wink. "Only one's got the power to do that."

"I never thought you would serve as a lackey to Lord Voldemort, poltergeist."

The cackle rang across the office, and Fawkes trilled in protest as Peeves howled with insane glee.

"Him?" Peeves asked, laughing through his words – something that sounded far too eerie in Dumbledore's opinion, but understandable as he realized that Peeves didn't have to breathe. "Why would I waste my precious time catering to his whims?"

"You're telling me you're not working –"

"Dumbledore, if I've learned anything in this next round is that I only have to do what I want to do, and nothing more," Peeves said, his voice ominously dropping an octave. His eyes narrowed into slits as his grin spread wider. "You know... Headmaster's a funny term, particularly considering one in your position..."

Dumbledore's eyes flashed. "Do not try my patience, Peeves, or you know –"

Peeves howled with laughter again, and Dumbledore's ears began to ring from the echo. All around the room, the candles flickered.

"One of these boys is not like the others..." Peeves sang, every note minor and sinisterly melodic. "Isn't that what they say? Isn't that the rule of the game?"

"PEEVES!"

The voice boomed across the room, and even the poltergeist seemed startled at the massive sound from Dumbledore's mouth. The candles roared to flickering life, and Fawkes trilled again, offsetting Peeves' dirge.

Dumbledore removed the wand from his throat and pointed it at Peeves again. "What do you want, Peeves?" he asked softly, his voice deadly serious.

"Just to tell you a little something, Headmaster," Peeves said, with the horrifyingly familiar air of someone cradling a massive bombshell in his hand. "An old, ah, friend is back at Hogwarts, a caretaker of sorts... that is, to say, he's good with his hands..."

Dumbledore frowned, his mind whirling through the possibilities.

"Of course, you killed him twenty-six years ago," Peeves added with a demonic smile. "Here at Hogwarts, no less, keeping it very quiet all the while. Good thing too – wouldn't have wanted him to get his hands on any more of those pretty little boys..."

Dumbledore's blood ran cold, the feeling of déjà vu falling over him like an avalanche. His hands clenched in to white-knuckled fists as the weight of what Voldemort had unleashed pressed down on him.

"This nightmare has been beaten before."

Peeves gleefully cackled as he finally met Dumbledore's gaze. "You know, you should really tell Argus Filch and Dennis Creevey that one – I'm sure they'll appreciate!"

The candles blazed brighter, and the door of the office flew open with a glance. With a flutter of his cloak, Dumbledore was gone.

But even as phoenix song filled his ears as Fawkes flew ahead, he could still hear Peeves' howls of laughter behind him.

* * *

"Harry, I can explain –"

"I'm sure you can," Harry cut Hermione off in mid-sentence, without looking back, "but I'd prefer to hear this from Ron."

"Harry, I didn't know she was here, I swear it!" Ron said, his face growing paler by the second. "I – I know how you feel about this whole mess, and I didn't tell a soul –"

"Harry, he didn't tell me anything," Hermione said, her eyes fixed on the back of Harry's head. "I overheard Ron tell Neville about it, that you were going to meet here, so I got here ahead of time –"

"And you didn't even check, for security's sake," Harry finished, not able to prevent the note of disappointment from filling his voice. "Merlin, Ron –"

"Look, we chose to have the meeting out here because it wasn't close to the school!" Ron replied heatedly. "We weren't trying to be overheard –"

"I'm sure," Harry replied, spinning around to fix Hermione with a glare. "So what are you thinking about Ron's plan, Hermione? He didn't tell you about it, but you heard everything we said, so what's your opinion?"

Hermione pressed her lips together as her eyes met Harry's.

"Come on!" Harry snarled. "I know you've got an opinion, so spit it out!"

“It’s suicide!” Hermione burst out, breathing quickly. “It’s madness, Ron, you can’t expect to break into the Ministry and not get caught –”

“Or fight your way out,” Harry growled.

“It’s insane, Ron, you don’t even have a plan –”

“I was working on it!” Ron replied angrily. “Damn it, we’re not just going to let Charlie get shipped off to Azkaban because that bitch wants to prove a point!”

“A suicide mission isn’t the answer, Ron!”

“For once, she’s right,” Harry said curtly, slamming the storage locker shut with a wave of his wand and a flash of sparks. He didn’t even need a word – the rage burning in his stomach provided all the power he needed. “It is a suicide mission, Ron – and this is coming from me.”

“He would have had the rest of us, Harry!” Fred said angrily. “We aren’t useless, you know!”

Harry ran a hand through his hair as he tried to rein in his temper. Kemester’s ugly face erupted into his vision, and he could feel the remnants of the bruises on his face twinge with pain. They don’t know, he thought grimly, they have no idea...

“Hermione, why did you follow us anyways?” Ron asked with a frown. “I mean, you’re not one for Quidditch –”

“Oh, please, Ron!” Hermione snapped. “I saw you use that spell in Charms, I can put two and two together!”

Harry’s stare snapped to Ron. “You used... you used one of those spells in class?”

“It was to get me out of a tight spot with Flitwick, nothing else –”

“You don’t even know the full power of that magic, Ron!” Harry erupted, his temper finally breaking. “You could have killed someone!”

“Well, I guess that would have made me more prepared then, eh?” Ron shot back. “At least by your reckoning!”

The rage flooded out of Harry in an icy wave. He stepped back, leaning against the storage locker, shaking his head. He didn’t understand the sudden emptiness – only that the feeling was gone, and he wasn’t sure he would get it back.

“Harry?” Neville asked tentatively. “Are... are you all right?”

“Huh...” Harry muttered as he ran his hand through his hair again.

“Harry?”

“You don’t get it,” Harry whispered. “None of you do. Not even close. And the scary-as-shit part is that you think you know. You think you’re ready to fight, to kill, but you’re not. Not even fucking close.”

“Then teach us something, for Merlin’s sake, Harry!” George said suddenly, stepping forward. “Ron called you here so you can help us!”

“This is something I can’t help you with,” Harry murmured. “Rather, something I won’t help you with.” He stood up straighter and surveyed the group, a look of mingled scorn and grief crossing his face.

“I’m sorry, Ron, but you’re on your own.”

“Harry, please –”

“I’m not going to be a party to this!” Harry said, almost to himself as he moved towards the door, his footsteps ringing on the wooden

panels. "Keep the list of spells - I don't need it anymore - but for Merlin's sake be fucking careful where you point them."

"Do you not even care anymore, Harry?" Hermione exploded as Harry's hand touched the doorknob. "You don't give a –"

Harry paused, and turned to face Hermione. He saw her eyes wet with tears, her expression full of mingled pain and anger.

"Look at me, Hermione," Harry whispered, his voice full of disappointment and disgust. "The reason I'm still here is because I still do give a shit! I don't want to watch my friends die, Hermione!"

"You don't seem to have the same problem with other people!" Hermione replied, swallowing back tears. "How many people have you killed this year, Harry? How many innocents? One? Two? Four? A –"

She didn't get out another word, because Harry's wand was pointing an inch away from her face.

"You're going down a path you really, really don't want to go down, Hermione Granger," Harry whispered dangerously. "And at one time I thought you would have been with me till the end."

"I would have, Harry. Dear God, I would have," Hermione replied, blinking rapidly as her voice lost its steadiness, "but you're not the Harry Potter I knew a few months ago!"

"I think we both have come to realize that," Harry snarled, "but unlike you, I've accepted it." It was a lie – mostly – and he knew it, but he didn't care. "So I ask the question: why are you here? Is it because you want to save me, tell Dumbledore and bring me back? He already knows most of it, Hermione, and what he doesn't know, he suspects – and the more I get to know him, the more I begin to think that he has a laundry list of atrocities longer than my own! So what is it, Hermione? Why are you throwing away Ron's trust like this, while trying to destroy whatever's left of mine?"

Hermione couldn't speak – her eyes darted from the tip of Harry's wand, to the haunted coldness in his eyes. She was right – he had changed. It's not like I had a choice, though, he thought to himself. I didn't have options...

"I... I..."

"What, Hermione?" Harry asked coolly.

"I... I want m-my friend back, Harry!" she cried, tears now flowing unchecked down her face. "What happened to you?"

"What, am I suddenly not good enough for you?" Ron asked scathingly. He didn't get anything else out, because George had just smacked him across the back of the head.

Harry was silent, his eyes still fixed on Hermione's tears. Unlike before, there was no weight in the back of his throat. It was like he was at far away, watching himself from a high tower.

"I don't owe you an explanation, and you're not getting one."

"Harry –"

But Harry was already walking away, wrenching the door open with a swipe of his wand. He paused, and turned back to see the five of them watching him.

"Voldemort and I... we'll be going to the same place, and if you want to walk with me, you need to get on a different road," he said, his voice almost emotionless, echoing bleakly across the room. "Otherwise..."

He met Hermione's eyes again, and his own gaze hardened.

"Otherwise, I won't be seeing you."

He turned, and walked into the twilight, the door slamming shut behind him.

* * *

It was an arc of steel, all in a single piece. Dirty, rusted, chipped along the edge, one could hardly dignify it by calling it a knife, but it was enough.

It served its purpose.

The door was shut, and the lock clicked. A single twist of the key had ensured that. The room was dark, but not dank. Lit only by two candelabras, by the wall. No windows, no other doors. One way in.

No way out.

They stood there, shivering, nearly naked. They didn't dare look at each other, for they didn't know who would be the next. It had easier than even he had expected to get them this far. Coercing surrender was as easy as holding a knife with a practiced grip.

He did not look internally, for he had no need to. The man had no magic, but he needed none – not for this. He had no desire to look inward and see the screaming figure of an embittered old fool, his only solace in a subhuman creature that was worth less than nothing. Now that figure was less than a shadow, locked behind implacable purpose and the hot flames of passion.

No... this was better. Looking only outward, eyes roaming across the cool room. Cool was good – cool meant there would be hardness in all the right places, and delicate softness where it was required.

The overcoat was shrugged off effortlessly, revealing a tattered brown shirt and an even worse pair of trousers. For a moment, his nose wrinkled in disgust at his own appearance, but there was nothing to come of it. He had been given another chance to savor his pleasures – he was not going to delay on account of cleanliness.

He turned the knife over in his hand, running the flat end along the unshaven stubble on his blockish chin. He was unsurprised that the

wiry hair did not fall away – it had been uncut for so long, it had taken up permanent residency.

His lip curled. It was time.

But who to pick? He had gathered five – the most he had dared at this time – and all of them looked most appetizing. Fresh, nubile bodies, devoid of imperfections... those that he could see, that is. His hands itched for the chance to tear it all away, trace every line and contour, but he mustn't be hasty. Not this time – after all, why take an unworthy pleasure?

He cleared his throat as he raised his knife.

“My little friends, I'm going to conduct a bit of an... examination, so to speak. You will stand, and you will not move, and you will not speak.” He took a step closer, reveling as the five quaked at his every step. “When the Healer finds what he is looking for, he will... collect. And if you prove unwilling to pay that debt...”

His voice trailed off, as his eyes traced the tracks of tears cascading down their faces. He wasn't surprised.

His eyes landed on the first boy, his beautiful brown eyes still wet. Those beautiful eyes only widened when he stepped closer, the knife moving as gracefully as his arthritic fingers would allow.

“I think... I'll start with you.”

* * *

The scream split the hallway, the torches went out in a second, and Harry's wand was out in a second. He looked wildly around the deserted corridor, trying to trace the echo, a horrifying feeling of déjà vu filling his gut –

“Oh, Harry?”

Harry's eyes snapped up and instantly narrowed with fury as Peeves casually floated down from his seat on what was once a lit torch.

"I don't have time for this, Peeves –"

"It's a shame you never really listened to Colin, Harry," Peeves said, a disturbing note of cheer in his voice. "You should have gone looking for Dennis –"

The blood fled from Harry's face. "What are you talking about, Peeves?"

"Dumbledore already knows, and even now he's racing up to a room in Gryffindor Tower to correct an error decades in the making, but I wouldn't have you miss this for the world, Harry," Peeves added, a gleeful smile on his face. "But that's just it – if you go there, you'll miss the little fracas in the dungeons even now. So here it is – you'll have to choose your poison and only one, a drink from a giant's goblet, if you will..."

"What's going on in the dungeons?" Harry growled. "Tell me, Peeves, or I fucking swear to Merlin I'll –"

"No, no, no, no, that's not part of the game, Harry," Peeves replied with a demonic smile. "I'm not going to tell you that – you'll have to make the choice and you'd better hurry. Or else..." Peeves' grin grew impossibly wide as his voice dropped two octaves. "Else Dennis Creevey might wish he had never been born."

* * *

The door cracked open, flooding the roughly hewn room with light, and Reed Larshall was on his feet in seconds.

"It's past dinner –"

"Get your partner up," a cold, yet surprisingly young voice echoed in the room. Larshall's eyes narrowed as he looked at the cloaked and hooded figure, silhouetted against the light.

“He’s not my partner –”

“I don’t care. Get him up – you’re leaving.”

Larshall’s mouth fell open. “Leaving? What the –”

Even the darkness, he could see the wand pointing at him. “The way is open, and I’m the gatekeeper – now move.”

“Who sent you?” Larshall asked suspiciously, nudging a sleeping Sanders with his foot.

“It’s better that you don’t know.”

“How do I know this isn’t a trap?”

The figure tossed two wands on the floor, along with a tiny bag that Larshall recognized instantly.

Floo powder.

* * *

“Professor Dumbledore, the door is sealed –”

“Please step aside, Miss Johnson,” Professor Dumbledore said grimly, pointing his wand at the bolted door. The location of the room only began to confirm his suspicions. Even the words I speak here... to different people, but history does indeed repeat itself. “Did you see who entered this room before the screams started?”

“Just a bunch of second years and Filch,” Alicia Spinnet said, swallowing hard as she looked at the door. “All the second year boys in Gryffindor, really –”

“Did the caretaker bring anything with him into the room?”

Angelina exchanged a glance with Alicia. “I – I thought I saw a flash of metal, might have been a...”

Dumbledore closed his eyes against the rush of the memory. He was barricaded in the laundry room in Gryffindor Tower, and with the flash of metal...

The portrait hole burst open, with a shuddering crash as the Fat Lady’s portrait bounced off the wall with an agonized squeal. But from the expression on Harry’s face, Dumbledore suspected that the young wizard didn’t care.

“Peeves told me you’d be here,” Harry gasped, clutching the stitch in his chest as he wrenched his wand free. “It’s happening again, where’s Dennis Creevey?”

“Dennis is in there?” Colin said with rising horror, the colour draining from his face. “Professor, is he –”

“He’s in the laundry room,” Dumbledore replied, his eyes fixed on the bolted door. “And yes, Harry, it is happening again.”

“Then what the hell are we waiting for?” Harry demanded. “Force the bloody door, break the Sealing Charm!”

“Not until he screams,” Dumbledore replied, a haunted look crossing his face as he looked back at the door. “Or else every boy in that room will be worse than dead.”

“Are you insane?” Harry yelled. “We can’t afford to wait, something’s happening in the dungeons as we speak! There’s no time!”

“Harry –”

“Vercundus! REDUCTO!”

The twin curses, propelled by Harry’s fury, hit the door with incredible force, shattering every board, leaving the hinges twisted on the frame.

Girls began to scream and run for their dormitories, but Harry barreled straight into the room, Dumbledore right behind him...

Into the scene of a nightmare.

The bloodstains crawled up the walls and across the floor. In the corner, the bodies of four boys were piled in the corner, blood seeping across the stone...

And in the center was Argus Filch, his trousers undone, holding a rusty knife to Dennis Creevey's naked quivering throat.

"Hello, Dumbledore," Filch said, his eyes flashing. Something was wrong with his voice – it was deeper, as if it was used to coming from a heavier, thicker throat, not Filch's weedy rasp...

"Apollyon Pringle," Dumbledore replied, his eyes flashing with fury as he stepped around Harry to face the man. "It appears history is going to repeat itself tonight."

"Perhaps for you, but not for me, it's nearly completed," Filch growled, a horrifyingly husky note in his voice. The knife pressed tighter against Dennis' throat, and Harry could hear Colin's strangled cry outside. "Except this time, you can't kill me without sending the soul of poor little Argus Filch to his justly deserved hell. I can hear him screaming your name, you know, in here."

"I don't need to kill Argus to dispose of you, Apollyon," Dumbledore said menacingly, pointing his wand squarely at Filch's face. "Did you kill the other boys?"

The caretaker shrugged ominously, and a cruel grin crept on to his face. "They were imperfect."

Harry's breath nearly caught in his throat, but he could see a trace of breathing from the pile. He held back his sigh of relief – only unconscious, but by the spreading bloodstains, he wasn't sure for how long...

“You have nothing to win here, Apollyon,” Dumbledore said coldly, “and as you have already harmed my students, there will be no mercy for you.” He raised his wand an inch higher. “But you know this already, Apollyon – you’ve been here before.”

“Except you didn’t wait until the screams started this time,” Filch said, with a growing twisted smile. “And I have nothing left to lose –”

“Expelliarmus!”

“Harry, no!” Dumbledore shouted, but it was too late – the knife had already been ripped free from Filch’s hand. The caretaker’s pouchy eyes landed on Harry, and the smile grew even wider.

“I’ve always whispered in my deepest pleasure,” Filch whispered, “that one good body deserves another.”

The bloodstains went matte black, and Filch began to howl with pain, knocking Dennis sprawling as he began to thrash wildly. Harry’s eyes went wide as he saw a shadow erupting from the caretaker’s mouth –

It was like he had been hit in the head with an invisible Bludger. Harry felt his thoughts and vision vanish in a flash of pain as the shadow hit him full on in the face, a wild discordant humming filling his ears as he struggled to shield his mind –

CRACK.

His vision cleared, and he could see the shadow recoiling. Harry’s eyes widened – it looked like golden lines were traced across the coalescing apparition –

“Harry, get out!” Dumbledore shouted, his blue eyes shining in the darkness as a rush of silvery fire erupted out of his wand, streaking towards the howling shadow, which was forming a wretched face...

“I’m not leaving them!” Harry shouted, snapping his wand up to face the face. For a strange second, the face reminded him of Uncle Vernon – flabby, with hardly any neck or chin. But this face had a full

goatee instead of a mustache, and his eyes gleamed with far more cunning, the cunning of a man who had managed to hide his depredations of Dumbledore himself, if only for a short time –

“Flirting with a new brand of darkness, Harry Potter?” Apollyon Pringle’s deep, watery voice roared across the room. “But no matter, there are always others!”

A second later, the apparition vanished - and Dennis collapsed to his knees, screaming wildly and clutching his head. Harry’s eyes widened as he raised his wand towards Dennis, already knowing where the deranged specter had hidden –

Dennis Creevey’s face snapped up, and for a moment, Harry was struck by the sheer malevolence of the stare, all the more horrifying coming from Dennis’ innocent face.

“Are you going to kill me, Harry Potter?” Pringle hissed, his voice coming from Dennis’ mouth. “Are you going to kill the innocent little brother of your greatest fan?”

“Dennis!” Colin screamed, finally wrenching himself free of Angelina and Alicia and running into the room. “Don’t let him do this, fight him!”

“I’ve already crushed little Dennis’ soul,” Pringle said gleefully, “and come to think of it, he will be an excellent toy to play with –”

The rage filled Harry, burning away the shreds of his reason. In a second, he was back in the collapsing Zabini house again, his eyes meeting Aphrodite’s remorseless gaze. The words of the Killing Curse were on his lips, the power seething in his body –

“Harry, please!”

Colin’s agonized scream sliced through Harry’s rage like a dull knife, but it was not fast enough.

But Harry hadn’t been planning to kill this time.

“Mens fragor!”

A massive blue globe of crackling energy erupted out of Harry’s wand, slamming headlong into Dennis, crushing the boy into the floor. He began to scream, but Harry could see the shadow bleeding out of Dennis’ eyes, flooding away in dollops of sparking energy, coalescing into another howling face...

“Go back to hell, you perverted MONSTER!” Harry roared, as blue sparks erupted around his wand. He tried to ignore Dennis writhing on the floor in pain, at the implications of what he had done –

“You can’t break a mind that’s already broken, Potter!” Pringle shrieked. “So send me to Hell, I’ll meet you there –”

But not another word came from the specter’s mouth. Silver cords, flooding from the tip of Dumbledore’s wand, shot through the face, coiling and knotting in an incomprehensible pattern as the Headmaster’s eyes blazed. Harry stumbled backwards, his eyes going wide – this was power Harry had never seen before, beyond what he had ever expected –

“May the powers beyond my ken that will judge us all when we pass beyond,” Dumbledore intoned, his voice filled with raw emotion and booming above the screams, “forgive my soul.”

The scream stopped, and horror crossed Pringle’s ghastly face. “No...”

“Cassus... phasmatis... ETERNUS!”

White-hot light snaked down the silver cords, and Harry did the only thing he could think of – grabbing Dennis, he closed his eyes and dove for cover.

There was a flash that he could see through his eyelids, a single, long horrible scream, and then... nothing.

Not even a single word.

Harry didn't open his eyes. He couldn't – he wouldn't. It felt like a desecration – that his very presence in the room was something ineffably wrong...

“H-Harry...”

His eyes snapped open, to meet Dennis' tearful gaze, filled with emotions that Harry couldn't quite read and that he was sure he didn't deserve...

“It's all right, Harry.”

He looked up, and he saw Dumbledore's face, filled with pain. His own blue eyes were filled quiet, yet pained, triumph.

“What did you do?” Harry whispered.

“I destroyed Pringle's soul.”

Harry could only gape at the pronouncement. “W-What?”

“Magic... of obscene power, but with a terrible price,” Dumbledore murmured, and Harry could see the old man's hand shaking. “A spell I had never dared to use before now... and one that I do not feel I could ever use again.”

There was a sudden scrabbling, and Harry's eyes snapped across the room – to where Argus Filch was sitting, staring at his hands, tears running unchecked down his haggard face.

“He was innocent,” Dumbledore whispered. “Voldemort has shown his utter contempt for both of us in this attack, and by attacking innocents in this way, he has made it quite clear that there are no boundaries he will not cross.”

Harry didn't really know what to say, but the sudden feeling of guilt filled his heart like a lead weight. He had treated Filch worse than

Snape, but not even he had deserved this. Worst of all, it didn't seem like anyone would comfort him...

"Meow."

Harry could only look on with a lump in his throat as Mrs. Norris walked tentatively across the room. Filch's eyes widened slightly as the cat sidled up next to him, and it was with shuddering, shaking hands that he took the scrawny animal into his arms.

"Dennis!"

Harry slid away and got to his feet as Colin ran into the room, pulling his brother into a tight embrace, choking back sobs as he helped his brother to his feet.

"Get your brother to the hospital wing, he has been through a traumatic ordeal," Dumbledore said kindly. "Mr. Filch, I would ask that you go there as well, and take as long as you need."

A minute later, Harry and Dumbledore were alone in the room. Harry had closed the door, but not before catching a glance at the rest of the Gryffindors outside – and from the looks and tears on their faces, they had seen nearly everything.

He looked down at the bodies and had to take a steadying breath. Naked, bleeding... dying...

"We will need to get them to the hospital wing –"

"In a moment, Harry."

"There's no point to leaving them here, Professor, their position is not going to show any clues to the man behind this –"

"This... this was no work of man," Dumbledore said grimly, his eyes filled with cold fury as they moved from the bodies to the bloodstains still climbing up the walls. "And even you, Harry, cannot command this power yet?"

“What is it?” Harry whispered, his voice echoing strangely in the room.

“Something that should never have happened... a door that should never have been opened...”

A door that should never have been opened...

He sucked in a breath as realization crashed down on him. I’ve seen this already...

“Is there something wrong, Harry?” Dumbledore asked, turning to meet Harry’s eyes.

Harry met Dumbledore’s eyes for a long few seconds before turning away and shaking his head.

“It’s nothing, Professor.”

Author's Notes - in this case, the warnings are a little different. Besides the usual for violence and disturbing content, I'm going to throw in one for sexual situations. Nothing too racy, but I've been foreshadowing it for chapters. And as always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

"Is it really necessary we meet this late, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked, her eyebrows raising as the Headmaster settled himself behind his desk. The candles in the room were dimmed, and only a few embers were smoldering in the fireplace. Strangely, the room didn't appear particularly dark – partially because the Pensieve sitting on the corner of Dumbledore's desk made all the light that much more visible.

"Lord Voldemort is not sleeping, and neither should we," Dumbledore said calmly, looking at the three Order members across from him. "And as we all perfectly well know, there is not much sleep to be had within Hogwarts these days."

"It's a magical effect of some sort," Moody growled. "It has to be. Nobody in Hogwarts has been able to sleep restfully for almost a month, and you can tell by the circles under their eyes and the fraying tempers. Hell, Snape's probably been able to get the most sleep out of all of us here!"

"That's if you count being beaten unconscious as sleep," Snape retorted, clenching his hands into fists. "The Headmaster's right, though, we don't have a lot of time."

"Duly noted," Dumbledore said gravely, "particularly considering Voldemort is acting with a level of coordination and speed that we have not seen since the First War."

"And this is with his most dangerous Death Eaters behind bars," Snape said curtly. "It will get worse."

"Indubitably," Dumbledore agreed. "As of two days ago, Lord Voldemort executed several plans in rapid succession: the home of Nathan Cassane was attacked, along with the covert meeting place I had arranged with Scrimgeour; Snape was freed from Ministry

custody, and there was another ghostly attack upon innocents in our school."

"I've spoken to Poppy, and it is likely that all the students will make a complete recovery," Professor McGonagall added. "It will take a bit longer for Argus, but she suspects that a bit of a break will be good for him."

"I will arrange a trip to the highlands for him as soon as possible, though it will have to be highly secret – we don't want the Ministry realizing that there are internal problems within Hogwarts," Dumbledore said gravely. "Alastor, have you received any new information from Kingsley?"

"The Department of Magical Law Enforcement is in chaos," Moody said with a snort. "Fudge's meddling has aggravated a lot of people, most notably Scrimgeour and Bones. Both of them Fudge needs on his side if they want to wage war against us. And most of the rest of the Departments are undecided where they stand."

"Do you believe there is any chance of reopening negotiations with the upper echelons of the Ministry?"

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "You think they'll want to negotiate?"

"Not in the slightest, but we must make some attempt to avert the conflict, if only to present the rational face to the wizarding public that has been sorely lacking in these past few days," Dumbledore said, his eyes meeting Moody's and Snape's, which were filled with skepticism.

"And when they refuse?"

"Oh, with the right impetus, I don't believe they will refuse my offer for more negotiations," Dumbledore replied, a glint creeping into his eyes. "The people we need inside the Ministry already support our cause, and it is simply a matter of having them take the necessary action."

"The only problem with that is Fudge's hair trigger," Moody said with disgust, rubbing the knee of his wooden leg.

"Not to mention the fact that the Dark Lord will begin eliminating those who show their true colours," Snape added darkly. "It was no coincidence that he had Gertrude Marchbanks killed, and I know for a fact that he has spies within the Ministry."

"You know names?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"None that I can release here," Snape retorted. "You know that as well as anyone, Professor."

"Regardless of these spies, we cannot afford to delay much longer," Dumbledore said gravely. "Once the instability within the Ministry is quelled to a manageable level, he will deliver his statements to the press, both foreign and domestic. If we cannot establish an arrangement beforehand, our next option is getting the truth to the wizarding public before Fudge delivers his statement."

"And I'm assuming we are not relying upon the Prophet?" McGonagall asked crisply.

"According to a trusted agent of mine, that particular issue should soon be resolved very soon, and if everything goes according to plan, that agent will soon have a very valuable member of the Ministry on our side." Dumbledore smiled. "Harry Potter's 'negotiation skills' have proven to be most beneficial to our cause."

"Bet they have," Moody grunted. "What about the goblins?"

"Again, according to Harry's information, initial contact has been made, and with our sympathizers there, a deal can swiftly be made. And Bill Weasley has already made some significant headway within Gringotts."

"I'm speaking to you privately after this meeting," Snape said abruptly. "Regarding that."

"You have new information?" Dumbledore asked, a hint of surprise creeping into his voice.

"There's not much I can give you, but it's private."

McGonagall and Moody both scowled, but Dumbledore nodded with agreement.

"What about Nathan Cassane?" McGonagall asked. "Did You-Know-Who manage to retrieve anything –"

"Cassane has not responded to any of my queries, but nor have I expected any," Dumbledore replied heavily. "And even despite the attack, I have little doubt that Cassane will want to remain as neutral in this conflict as possible. The fact that he was able to provide for us some necessary knowledge does not mean he is willing to take an active role against Voldemort."

"And we shouldn't want him to, either," Moody said suddenly, a hard note in his voice. "I've said it once and I'll say it again: bringing Nathan Cassane into this, despite his power and knowledge, is a terrible idea."

"He could be valuable –"

"Valuable like a Combustion Concoction," Snape said harshly. "I'm with the Auror on this. Cassane cannot be controlled, and keeping him in any sort of proximity to the Order would be dangerous beyond measure. He's a loose cannon at best and a dangerous liability at worst."

"Fortunately," Dumbledore interrupted before McGonagall could reply, "he shows no interest in this conflict, and unless we have no other choice, I will not be pursuing him."

"We already know he could have vital knowledge to whatever's attacking people in our school, we can't just disregard this!" McGonagall said heatedly. "If we're to stop any more of these attacks –"

"We must do it on our own," Dumbledore said firmly. "Fortunately, we already have a great deal of information surrounding the attacks – our

challenge will be thwarting them before there is significant damage, and finding the instigator."

"And this incident, Professor, is not like that of the Chamber of Secrets," Snape said icily. "I fully expect Slytherins to fall victim to these attacks in the long run."

Dumbledore gave Snape a penetrating look. "Do you have new information surrounding this, Severus?"

"The Dark Lord is indeed behind it – he is not concealing that," Snape spat. "If anything, he wants that truth to be known. But in this case, he is not utilizing typical Death Eaters whom I would be able to identify. And while I remain valuable to the Dark Lord –"

"He would not hesitate to eliminate you if you were to begin active investigations," Dumbledore finished with a solemn nod.

"We still need information regarding the Death Eaters, and we cannot afford to lose another qualified professional and Order member at this school," McGonagall said curtly. "Snape must be kept out of this."

"Agreed," Dumbledore said, sliding a small pile of books across the desk. "In the mean time, while we continue our investigation, I would like these exorcism books to be distributed amongst the entire staff. Memorize every single spell found within – we do not know how and when these ghosts might attack. And any sighting of Peeves must be reported to me immediately – there is something wrong with that poltergeist."

Snape shifted in his chair, but said nothing.

"The entire staff must be made aware that something deep within Hogwarts has been broken," Dumbledore said gravely. "Something the Founders of this school created hundreds of years ago. That 'something' must be found and repaired, and given the other peculiar events – particularly that magical effect that surrounded Hogwarts – we cannot afford to forget the little details. Our priorities must be to protect the students and find the instigator of this crisis. If he or she

can be found and apprehended, we can end this before it has a chance to get worse."

"You think it might be a student?" Professor McGonagall asked, shock filling her voice.

"It is a possibility."

"It could have also been those two Hit Wizards who escaped from Snape's dungeons two nights ago, conveniently at the same time as the second attack," Moody added harshly. "All indications are that they fled, but it could have been a ruse, and they both could be behind this."

Snape bristled at the implied insult. "I wasn't even at the school at the time, Auror, and such implications – that I might be complicit in this – are unwise."

"I didn't survive this long without being suspicious," Moody retorted, "particularly towards those whose true colours have yet to be clearly seen –"

"Alastor, enough," Dumbledore said sharply. "What I need from you is information from within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – our people there need to be ready for the worst."

The colour left McGonagall's face, and even Snape tensed.

"If negotiations break down... and if all our efforts to stymie this war come to naught," Dumbledore said slowly, "we cannot have our country torn apart so Lord Voldemort can pick up the pieces. If Fudge has the chance to declare war..."

His voice trailed off as he looked at Moody.

"It'll be done, Dumbledore."

"Albus, you can't be serious," McGonagall began, looking between Dumbledore and Moody with renewed alarm.

"Nobody will know the truth, outside of this office," Dumbledore said softly, closing his eyes. "And we have enough people to control the transition."

"Albus –"

"Minerva," Dumbledore replied, meeting her horrified gaze. "It is better for only a few to be removed than to have our world under Lord Voldemort's tyranny."

"The Dark Lord will interfere."

"And in that, he will not be able to stop this," Dumbledore said, turning to Snape. "Voldemort will not protect them, and even if he tried, his efforts would be clumsy and unskilled. He is not a protector, Severus, you and I both know this."

"He'll still interfere if he discovers any inkling of this –"

"That's why we have to keep it quiet," Moody growled, standing suddenly. "I'll tell Kingsley, but I recommend that the details be hidden from the rest of the Order unless we have no other choice. Besides, there are too many leaks right now, too few people that we can trust."

"And in this matter, secrecy is essential," Dumbledore said quietly, a very grim note in his voice, his eyes fixed on McGonagall. "If all plans fail... and if we have no other choice or option... and only if there is no other way and Lord Voldemort is bearing down upon us..."

"Fudge dies," Snape finished savagely.

"But Harry, you can't just –"

"I can, Ron, and the last thing I need is to draw any more suspicion to myself," Harry replied briskly, descending the stairs quickly as he moved towards the statue of the one-eyed witch. "And with Dumbledore meeting with McGonagall, Moody, and Snape, they won't notice I'm leaving until I'm already gone."

"Harry, where are you –"

"Don't ask questions, it's better you don't know," Harry interrupted curtly, not even looking back at Ron's astounded face.

"Damn right it's not my business!" Ron said angrily, hurrying up to Harry and grabbing his shoulder. "Despite everything, Harry, you're my friend, and if you're going to do something –"

Harry spun around and glared at Ron. "I told you, it's better you don't know. You can't know."

"How illegal is it? Does Dumbledore know?"

"He's probably got some inkling by now," Harry snapped, twisting out of Ron's grasp and storming down the hall. "And he's figuring out more and more every damn day –"

"Can I help?"

Harry's laugh was brief, harsh, and utterly humorless. "You wouldn't want to, if you knew the truth. Besides, I've got help."

"Damn it, Harry, you can trust me –"

"How?" Harry snarled, spinning around again to face Ron in the corridor, the long shadows from the torches crossing their paths as he heard the distant rumble of thunder out the window. Despite the relatively early hour in the evening, the sky was already dark.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean! You let Hermione eavesdrop on your mad plan before –"

"I told you, I didn't know she was there –"

"And you stole that sheet of spells from me," Harry finished, his eyes blazing. "Ron, how do you explain that? It's almost as if you didn't trust me!"

Ron opened his mouth, but no words came out. He was lost for words, and Harry knew it.

"If you can trust me with anything," Harry began slowly, meeting Ron's eyes with a dangerous expression, "then as your friend, I'm asking you to do one thing: don't follow me. You, me, this entire damn school will be safer that way."

Without another word, Harry turned, pulled on his Invisibility Cloak, and he was gone, leaving Ron seething behind him.

"Professor McGonagall seems... uncomfortable with your ultimatum."

"It was not an ultimatum," Dumbledore said wearily, "and hopefully she will realize it will not come to that. Sometimes desperate measures are required. She was not in the Order last time, she does not completely understand that."

"I wasn't either," Snape snapped, "but that's not the point, is it?"

"Do not try to bait me, Severus, it's unbecoming of you and your intelligence," Dumbledore replied evenly as he settled himself behind his desk and folded his hands. "Although you could not have been more obvious earlier."

"What?"

"You've encountered Peeves recently, and I need every detail."

"No, you don't."

"Severus –"

"You don't need details, Dumbledore," Snape snarled, slamming his fist on the arm of the chair. "Period. All you need to know is that he was there... I saw him where the werewolf found me."

"And what did he say?" Dumbledore's voice was soft, barely a whisper.

"You don't need to know that."

"Severus, do not make this difficult."

Snape's eyes flashed. "What, you don't want to know how it feels to live a difficult life, Headmaster?"

"Severus, this is not the time," Dumbledore said, rising to his feet and moving towards one of his bookshelves. "Lord Voldemort is not wasting time, and I would find it difficult to believe that you do not know the identity of his Death Eaters within this school."

"There's only one other," Snape growled through clenched teeth, "besides me, if you're counting."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, as if he was carefully considering his next words, his fingers drifting over the spines of the leather-bound books. "His name, Severus."

"I can't tell you that," Snape said curtly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Do not be petulant, Severus, it is unbecoming of you –"

"The Dark Lord will know if I tell you, and my life will be forfeit. And even if I told you the name, it would be of no use – the Dark Lord is using foils." There was a bitter note in Snape's voice, and both of his hands were clenched tightly as he also rose to his feet. "Even for me."

"It is Draco Malfoy, is it not?"

"I can't say one way or another."

"But he is involved?"

"Dumbledore, I can't say," Snape growled.

"Severus, lives and souls are at stake here," Dumbledore said, turning to face the Potions professor. "If you are not bound by a

magical compulsion and it is only fear for your own life holding you back, I can protect you –"

"What, like you protected Lily?" Snape exploded, his temper finally breaking.

"Severus –"

"Enough excuses and lies – you can't protect me, Dumbledore!" Snape roared. "I agreed to come back for one last year, and you seem committed to wrenching every drop of service you can wring out of me!"

Dumbledore's eyes hardened. "Severus, there are four girls in the hospital wing who will never recover! Do you wish to be the one to write the letters to their families, their mothers and fathers, telling them that their daughters, under our care, are now worse than dead? Lord Voldemort has chosen to attack innocents under my power, and with Pringle's resurrection and subsequent destruction, I now know he is doing this to target me, with a brutal message I don't dare return in kind. I will not sink to Voldemort's level, Snape – and nor should you."

"You suggest," Snape sneered, after a few seconds of silence, "that by withholding information about the identity of the missing Death Eater here, I'm as complicit as the Dark Lord, even though the revealing of that information would come with the certainty of my death. Very noble, Headmaster."

"I will not let the children under my charge come to more harm, Severus," Dumbledore said, his eyes blazing. "The names, Severus, of the Death Eaters responsible for this."

It was not a question.

Snape looked out the window, his eyes as blank as fogged glass on a frozen day. "You're on the right track with Malfoy, but the Dark Lord has layered his foils – and his plan is already too far in motion. It is only the direction of the Death Eater that keeps Hogwarts still safely sane, at the cost of the sanity of the Death Eater involved."

Dumbledore frowned. "You're saying –"

"I'm saying nothing," Snape snarled, turning to face Dumbledore for a few seconds before looking back out the window, where storm clouds blanketed the sky and thunder was rumbling. "All I mention is that you might wish to wait before closing in – otherwise Hogwarts will be ruined irreparably."

Dumbledore was silent for a few seconds. Fawkes let out a mournful, slightly discordant trill as Snape continued to avoid Dumbledore's gaze.

"You're suggesting –"

"His controlling pattern will make it evident soon enough," Snape snapped. "Not much longer now, for us."

"Perhaps for us, but not for everyone else," Dumbledore said, taking a deep breath as he pulled an extremely battered book from the shelf and gestured for Snape to come closer. "Come here, I want you to step out onto my balcony."

"The view isn't as good as that from the Astronomy Tower," Snape said with a disinterested shrug. "Why do you think we always find ignorant couples fornicating up where they think we won't find them?"

"Take a look at the sky, Severus," Dumbledore said quietly, "and tell me what you see."

Snape snorted, but looked out at the miasma of storm clouds. Lightning and rain weren't yet pelting the castle, but he knew it was only a matter of time –

He paused, frowning as he squinted out at the clouds. Something was wrong, because it was raining, and there was lightning in the sky... just none over Hogwarts. The castle and the grounds seemed untouched by the storm, even as the black clouds floated overhead.

"I don't recognize this magic," Snape murmured, drawing his wand.

"Nor did I, until I found this book while searching for books regarding the hidden histories of Hogwarts," Dumbledore replied, carefully pulling the book open. "It's an old treatise written in the thirteenth century regarding the theory behind the enchantment of buildings and it makes a very interesting claim."

"What?"

"That if two exceptionally powerful magical effects occurred within the vicinity of magic like that which surrounds Hogwarts, something horribly unpredictable could happen," Dumbledore said gravely. "My suspicion is that this is a temporal distortion, surrounding the entire school."

Snape turned quickly to face Dumbledore, clear skepticism on his face. "Time magic? That belongs in the Department of Mysteries –"

"Not an intentional distortion, Severus, but born of two, possibly unrelated magical effects," Dumbledore replied pensively. "And Voldemort's plan seems to be one of the contributing factors."

"And the other?"

"I do not know," Dumbledore replied calmly, "but I suspect – and you do not need to confirm or deny this – that the Death Eaters within this school unleashed the magic the same night Hogwarts was seemingly engulfed in a conflagration of magic unlike none I have ever seen –"

"The same night Potter disappeared," Snape interrupted.

Dumbledore let out a small chuckle. "Despite Harry's rising skill, such magic would be beyond him – on my level of my prodigious skill, or even higher. I suspect that the young Death Eaters within this school only utilized the magic following Voldemort's exact tutelage, and that it took a great deal of work to activate such magic within the school." He gave a heavy sigh. "Of course, that also makes the neutralization of said Death Eaters extremely dangerous, because if they lose control of the magic that Voldemort has found –"

"Hogwarts could be lost in time," Snape said slowly. "That's why you aren't insisting I give the names to you –"

"Or use Legilimancy to find out the whole truth of the matter from you, or at least enough to put an end to this thread," Dumbledore added grimly. "Until we can reverse the distortion, which I suspect is tied directly to our incorporeal threat, I dare not apprehend the culprit, for the release of his control could destroy this school."

"How are you so sure it's tied to –"

"Did not Peeves confront you in the Floo Network, Severus?" Dumbledore returned coolly. At the sudden impassive look on Snape's face, he continued. "I didn't need Legilimancy to figure this out, Severus – this distortion will strongly affect magical transportation, and the Floo Network is no exception."

Snape shifted uncomfortably at the implication – he didn't like others in his mind, and he knew that it would try even his defenses to keep Dumbledore out. "And that's why that watch of yours wasn't working a few days ago –"

"If Time is a river – a hotly debated hypothesis by many Unspeakables – then the current in Hogwarts has become heavy, flowing slower within the normal stream of time," Dumbledore said, a note of wonder in his voice as he saw lightning dance across the sky, the thunder strangely muted. "Really just a dampening of entropy as I understand it, and this sort of entropy is a construct of blended science and magic, only understood in the bleakest Arithmancy equations and inexplicable runic reactions." He turned to face Snape. "Something that even I don't completely understand."

"The Dark Lord didn't plan for this."

"Of that, we are both certain," Dumbledore agreed, stepping back into the office, Snape close behind him. "Lord Voldemort would not want his school lost to time, but it works in his favour. Though I cannot predict the rate of temporal decay, it slows our reaction time. Voldemort will be able move much quicker from our perspective."

"With the ghosts and now this, it'd be safer if we just evacuated the school," Snape said curtly, returning to his seat.

"And go where?" Dumbledore replied, blinking twice as he sat opposite the Potions master. "The most we can do is react to the threats, respond with no casualties, and track the pattern before disaster strikes."

Snape was silent for a long few seconds, until –

"You haven't told the staff or, Merlin curse me, Potter yet, have you? What about the students?"

"The temporal distortion would cause a greater panic if the truth is made known," Dumbledore said grimly. "Fortunately, with the Ministry's recent actions, cancellation of Hogsmeade trips will not be questioned, and the holidays... well, depending upon the Ministry's actions, we may be able to avoid a confrontation there. I plan to inform the staff as soon as possible."

"And Potter?"

"It will be explained to him, given his missions," Dumbledore said firmly.

A bitter smile crossed Snape's lips as he heard a ringing crack of thunder; the storm had passed through the temporal distortion. "You know such missions will be in jeopardy, because of three little things I learned."

Dumbledore tensed. "What you wanted to tell me earlier."

"Yes," Snape said darkly as he raised a long finger. "Number one: Dmitri Kemester is alive."

"I suspected as much," Dumbledore said heavily, "given that his body was not found. How did he survive?"

"Round-the-clock emergency treatments, most of which would be considered inhumane by any reasonable Healer out of St. Mungo's,"

Snape growled. "And he wants Potter apprehended for everything he's done – something I can slightly sympathize with, I might add. But more importantly, he suspects that something is amiss."

Dumbledore understood instantly, and his eyes brightened with interest. "Could he become an asset to our cause?"

Snape snorted. "Only if Potter is dead, and that's going to happen on your watch. And besides – and this is my second point – he's in it thick with Lucius Malfoy, who also has a score to settle. Malfoy wants Potter to pay for what he's done."

Dumbledore tensed for a moment. "Do you know Malfoy's plan?"

"Not enough of it," Snape snapped, rising quickly and beginning to pace. "He brought me into a meeting with a group of Gringotts bankers, but it was not a real discussion – mostly just legalese and a few Imperius Curses."

Dumbledore sat bolt upright. "Severus –"

"This time I can't say a damned thing, whether I want to or not," Snape said grimly. "Lucius told me to sign as a witness on the papers, and that means it's all confidential, magically sealed with Tongue-Tying Curses and Obliviations to boot. All I know is that Kemester found something related to wizarding financial law when he was combing the Hogwarts library – and now they're using it."

"They're trying to take his gold," Dumbledore said, rising to his feet and raising his wand, his eyes gleaming with sudden realization. "Malfoy wants him to pay – literally."

"What are you planning on doing, contacting the goblins?"

"They might be able to thwart –"

"Not this time," Snape said tonelessly. "Kemester – that clever fucker Kemester – found the loophole that the Ministry's been trying to find for centuries."

"Then I will contact Harry himself," Dumbledore said, raising his wand. "He is already engaged in negotiations with the goblins, he may be able to –"

"And that leads me to my third point," Snape said bitingly, raising a third finger. "Where is Potter?"

"Outside of the school, under my permission," Dumbledore said, a small smile rising to his lips. "A boon to us – he'll be able to act without interference –"

"Where's Nymphadora Tonks?"

Dumbledore's small smile vanished in an instant. "So you noticed it too."

Snape snorted. "Potter is disappointingly obvious, Headmaster. The only two he confided in were Black and the Metamorphmagus –"

"A development of which I approve. Miss Tonks has a good head on her shoulders, and she will be an excellent influence on Harry. Alastor also approves –"

Snape slammed both his fists on the desk, his patience finally gone. Fawkes gave a shrill squawk as another roll of thunder split the air. "Dumbledore, Kemester interrogated me when I was at the Ministry, and he let slip that a 'school friend' of Potter's – a female friend – gave information to him while he was still at Hogwarts. Mostly false or misleading information about Potter, but there was enough there to make Kemester think he had a chance of arresting the arrogant fool on his way back from Hogsmeade – and he did, one of the many events that led to the disaster we have today.

"But I knew as well as anyone that Potter was on the outs with the Granger girl, and that she would never be caught dead sneaking around late at night." Snape's eyes flashed. "Only one person would have dared – someone who can change her shape at will."

"I don't like what you're implying, Severus," Dumbledore said warningly.

"It's a plan you never would have condoned, this leakage," Severus hissed, "because you would have realized that it was only going to go horribly wrong. But she didn't. No, she acted out of loyalty to Potter, which has become stronger than any loyalty to the Order."

"So Nymphadora erred, Severus, as we all do," Dumbledore replied, a small note of anger in his voice. "And Harry became only stronger for it."

"And all the more willing to kill whoever gets in his way, but that's hardly the point now, is it?" Snape sneered.

Dumbledore rose to his feet. "Severus –"

"My point is not that Miss Tonks is a fool for attempting such a gambit with Kemester – a gambit, might I add, that has left people dead," Snape snarled, crossing his arms over the chest. "Rather, that Potter might have such feelings, or even more, towards our fiery and rebellious Auror."

"A friend Harry needs!"

"And cannot afford to lose," Snape said grimly, "because Sirius Black is in Hogsmeade right now, and his mission is to kill Nymphadora Tonks right in front of Potter – just like the Dark Lord planned. And with Potter and likely Miss Tonks in the town..."

He left the words unspoken, but the implication was clear: there would be death in Hogsmeade tonight.

Harry was certain of only one thing as he stumbled up the muddy path towards the Shrieking Shack: as magical as the Invisibility Cloak was, it was not water-proof. The icy trickles down his face and neck were evidence of it, and he could feel himself shivering violently as sheets of water fell from the sky. It almost seemed like the thunder was muted through the curtains of heavy rain, but Harry could feel the vibrations, could see the jagged lightning crossing the sky like so many cracks into some horrifying alternate world, could smell the reek of ozone and burned air...

He shook his head quickly and quickened his pace, nearly slipping on the wet grime that coated the abandoned, weed-filled trail up the Shack. The building, if anything, looked as though a single strong blast of wind could send it splintering along the hillside, and Harry fervently hoped it wouldn't happen while he and Tonks were still inside.

He drew his wand as he approached the door, heavily boarded up with rotting faggots of wood. His eyes narrowed as he carefully crossed to the side of the house, where a gaping hole the size of a man (or a small werewolf) was present.

"Oh, come on, Tonks," he muttered to himself, as he bent to squeeze himself through the hole and into the darkened Shack. "It can't be that —"

His words were cut off by a wand at his throat.

"Password?"

"Simulamancer," Harry replied instantaneously, relaxing slightly at Tonks' amused tone.

"Nah, could still be a Death Eater. What... is your name?"

"Harry Potter —"

"What... is your quest?"

Harry rolled his eyes, but a fresh prod of his neck prompted a response. "To execute the simulamancy ritual and thus defeat Voldemort. Now, Tonks —"

"What... is your favourite —"

"Oh, stop it, Tonks, you know it's me," Harry said exasperatedly, shoving himself through the hole and glaring at the widely grinning Auror. "Besides, I wasn't followed, and every child in this country should know those lines. That Muggle film is ubiquitous — hell, I bet most witches and wizards have seen it!"

"Huh, I thought it was just me," Tonks mused, lightly pushing Harry further into the dilapidated room. "Then again, my Dad was a Muggle-born."

"What are you doing?" Harry asked warily as Tonks raised her wand to point at the haphazard beams above the hole.

"Collapsing the entrance."

"Are you crazy? How are we going to get out?"

"There's an underground passage that'll let us out," Tonks said with a wink. "But then again, you already knew that, didn't you?"

Harry opened his mouth, and then closed it as with a single wordless jab of Tonks' wand, the ceiling around the hole shuddered before collapsing violently around the improvised entrance. The Shack shuddered, but the rough timbers somehow kept the crumpled ceiling from collapsing any further.

"There," Tonks said, tucking her wand away. "Impassable, just like before."

"Minus the structural damage, of course," Harry replied, glancing nervously at the ceiling. "I thought you couldn't get into the Shrieking Shack from the outside – Fred and George have been trying for years."

"Well, they couldn't Apparate, now could they?" Tonks said with a shrug. "I just blew the hole in the wall with an overpowered Bludgeoning Curse and spent the next hour trying to shore up the walls and ceilings enough so that when I did collapse the entrance, the entire dump wouldn't come tumbling down around our ears. Not to mention," she added, with a growing smile, "that I spent all this time trying to get this ritual ready –"

"Yeah, yeah, I get the point," Harry muttered, following Tonks into the tiny bedroom. As before, the books were resting in a pentagonal shape on the table (something that Tonks had clearly scavenged, as

two of the legs were broken and propped up with books), and the body of the dead Death Eater was lying on a Transfigured stone table, covered with a white sheet. Unlike before, Harry didn't see another table where he was supposed to lie. In fact, he didn't see much else in the room at all, besides the old dusty bed that Harry had seen years ago.

He noticed Tonks was scanning the books avidly. "Any problems getting the body over here?"

Tonks looked up at him and snorted. "Come on, Harry, you shouldn't even have to ask that question. With the chaos in the Ministry right now, I doubt anybody notices or cares about its absence."

"Did we find out who it was, at least?"

"The girl is Lucy Warrington, a quiet girl who graduated Hogwarts a year after I did," Tonks said, her smile fading somewhat. "Slytherin girl, kept to herself, she worked at Flourish & Blotts after Hogwarts. Really, I'm not surprised that she went over to Voldemort – it's all too easy in her environment."

"Tonks, it was a bookshop."

"Exactly my point," Tonks said, her hair going auburn as she waved her wand, carving a diagnostic spell in the air. "Dark magic is insidious, Harry, and the scary thing is that some of it can be sold if you can afford it, and not just from Knockturn Alley. No, I'm sure Flourish & Blotts has a section of some pretty nasty books – all for 'academic' reasons and at an exorbitant price, but I bet they're there. And she would have had access to all of them."

"Wait a minute... I know a Warrington!" Harry said after a few seconds of thought. "Cole Warrington, he's on the Slytherin Quidditch team!"

"And so was her older brother, likely the other unidentified Death Eater rookie who showed up at Cassane's house," Tonks finished with disgust. "And it's likely where Mr. Cole Warrington is going as soon as Voldemort convinces him the Ministry was responsible for his

sister's death. She might be somewhat estranged from her family, but they'll still care."

Some of the colour left Harry's face. "That... that's just sick."

"Yeah, well, it's not the first time Voldemort's used the tactic," Tonks replied quietly, scribbling down a few calculations. "According to the old Ministry debriefs that I studied, some of Voldemort's nastiest Death Eaters were disillusioned by the way the Ministry behaved in the last war... hell, Sirius should be able to tell you more about that."

Harry stepped up next to Tonks and looked carefully at the body. "Will the Dark Mark's magic interfere with the simulacrum?"

"Not as far as I can tell," Tonks replied with another frown. "But it's another variable that I know nothing about when it comes to this ritual, so I really can't be too sure."

"It doesn't seem like you're as harassed this time with the ritual as before, though," Harry remarked, a hint of his grin returning.

"Bodies don't decay when they're in a Ministry morgue," Tonks said simply, "and that means there's a load of diagnostic spells I don't need to cast." Setting down the quill, she turned to face Harry with a devious smile on her face. "I think, though, you know what part of the ritual comes next."

"Uh, Tonks –"

She had picked up the silvery sheet almost unthinkingly, but her eyes, shifting from colour to colour with a strange intensity before settling on an ivy shade that matched his own, hadn't left Harry's gaze. The smile on her face was playful, as if she was looking forward to something...

He could feel her hand creep around him, sliding up his buttocks and into his shirt, stroking his back beneath it. Her other hand was gripping the edge of his cloak, slowly pulling it away. Her hair had returned to bubblegum pink, but had grown longer and softer beneath his hands.

"You want me to strip," Harry whispered, his eyes not leaving hers.

Tonks only responded by pressing her mouth against his, and in a second, Harry felt his heart hammer inside his chest. It wasn't like kissing her the three times before; no, he wanted it this time, he had been craving it in the back of his mind and in barely remembered dreams when he could steal a minute of sleep...

She broke the kiss, her playful smile returning. "Of course I want you to strip," she replied matter-of-factly, her hand tugging away his cloak to fall onto the dusty floorboards. "Only this time, I'm going to help... and it's going to be a mutual experience..."

She pressed her body against his, and Harry found his hands tracing the muscular curves of Tonks' body. Yet with every hesitation, he could feel Tonks changing her body. Her hips became more slender and defined beneath his touch, and he could feel her waist shrink ever so slightly as his hand mimicked Tonks' motions. Her legs grew longer, and Harry noticed that they were within an inch of each other's heights.

"You made yourself taller?"

"No, I changed my shoes when you weren't looking," Tonks replied as she kissed him again. Suddenly, Harry felt a new pressure his chest, and looking down, he saw the swell of her breasts pressing against him, straining against the provocatively tight Auror robes...

"That... I think that's cheating," Harry whispered.

"And most women would agree with that sentiment," Tonks said, pulling away Harry's robes and beginning to loosen his tie. "But then again, I'm not most women."

He took a deep breath. The silvery sheet was set aside against the table as his hands found something far better to do: pulling open the fastenings of her jacket. He was trembling, but there was no fear in what he was doing – no, for once, he wasn't afraid. He wanted this, he needed this, a moment of respite...

His lips met hers again, and he could taste her hunger, her desire, something that surprised him... he wasn't going to complain, but it was strange...

"So, are you a cougar now or something?"

"Don't complain, Harry, we've got more experience," Tonks murmured, finally pulling his tie free and beginning to work on the buttons of his shirt with a hungry intensity. Her eyes suddenly lit up. "Unless, you want me to transform into Hannah again –"

Harry smiled. "Nah, that's not what I want."

She sidled closer, her lips sliding next to his ear. "Then what do you want?"

"Keep your hair short. Having it long reminds me of Hermione, and that's not a turn-on."

Tonks could barely restrain a laugh, but her hair shot back up her back to a much shorter, feminine cut. She then gave Harry a sultry smile as she finally pulled his shirt away.

"That better?"

Harry only kissed her neck, and they both understood that words were no longer necessary.

And a few seconds later, with a distracted wave of Tonks' wand, neither were pants.

They kissed passionately, and Harry's rational thoughts began blurring as his hands felt the clasp of Tonks' bra, straining against her own modifications. After a second of trying to pull open, he gave it up as a lost cause as his hands slid down her naked back towards her panties...

He heard her give a low moan of pleasure as his fingers curled around the lace. His heart starting racing at the sound and the soft

touch of Tonks' lips on his neck as she maneuvered them towards the bed...

Harry felt his knees buckle as he fell backwards onto the rumpled sheets. Tonks was on top, but her weight was hardly bothersome. His fingers slipped on the slick fabric of Tonks' panties, and he leaned forward a bit to regain his grip...

But Tonks met him in mid lean, her face lit with passion. Her breasts protruded enticingly from her bra, and a hungry smile was on her face.

"No more... dancing around it, Harry," she whispered as she climbed closer, her eyes somehow gleaming brighter than any other light in the room. "I want you..."

He almost paused at that second – for a moment, he almost stopped to ask why on earth a beautiful Metamorphmagus wanted him, of all people. Years younger and a criminal to boot...

But then the moment passed, Tonks' lips met his again, and he stopped caring. His eyes closed as waves of bliss thundered through his head –

CRACK.

His ears popped painfully, and his eyes burned white from the glare as they snapped open. He blinked back tears, only to see something hot and huge plummeting towards his face...

Five minutes ago, she hadn't known why she had followed the anonymous tip, the suggestion to wait quietly outside the ornately carved and overly ostentatious door.

It was perilously dangerous – placing her in grave danger of breaking her little 'agreement' with the bitch – but she knew it was her big chance. Perhaps maybe – maybe – she would get the break she needed.

But now she understood.

The vapid bint of a receptionist was sobbing behind her desk, and the burly Hit Wizards were dragging a struggling and swearing Barnabus Cuffe out of his office. The man's handsome face was twisted grotesquely as he shouted obscenities.

"You have the right to remain silent... you have the right to an attorney... if you cannot afford one, a delegate from the Department of Magical Law will be provided for you..."

"You treasonous bastards!" Cuffe screamed, spittle flying from his lips. "You've got nothing, and I'll have your careers for this –"

He didn't even notice her, sitting quietly next to the door, a smirk growing across her lips as the Quick-Quotes Quill skidded across her lap.

He disregarded the pain and the blood seeping from his ringing ears. His muscles twisted, and with a single desperate jerk, he threw them both to the side.

The flaming faggot of wood hit the bed with a crash, the ragged sheets igniting in seconds. He could feel the heat of the flames singeing his back, and with a violent oath, he rolled off the bed entirely, taking Tonks with him.

"What the –"

"Distuli!"

Harry's eyes went wide as Tonks' wild spell took shape above them. It seemed to be roughly hemispherical, and whatever connected with it seemed to hover, suspended, above them.

Unfortunately, most of what was hovering was flaming debris, and by the paleness of Tonks' face, he knew it would only be a matter of time before she lost control of the spell and –

"The simulamancy!"

"We have to do it now, Harry, there's no time!" Tonks yelled over the crackle of flames, putting out the flaming bed with a violent jet of water from her wand. Her breasts still visibly bulged against her bra, and Harry desperately wished the blood would come back to his brain where it was urgently needed. "Just because some fuck decides to get in our way doesn't mean I'm stopping. This spell is only going to last a minute for him –"

"That's not enough time!"

"Maybe not for him, but for us it is!" Tonks screamed as another beam crashed against the barrier, causing her to audibly wince. "That spell I used won't let anything in or out for eight whole minutes of our time, and that'll be enough to trigger the ritual and get your bodies into the passage, but if this bastard's as good as I think, he's not going to give me that much time! Now strip, and hurry!"

"But how are you –"

Tonks swore violently, and with another violent slash of her wand and a loud ripping noise, Harry felt his clothes fly off. Sudden pain rocked the sensitive parts of his body.

"Fuck zippers!"

"And here I wanted you to say that!" Tonks shouted back, unable to keep a smile from crossing her face, even despite the flames and smoke and falling debris pressing in on him. "Now lie down and concentrate!"

"Tonks, this is suicide –"

Another wave of her wand sent him flying onto the suddenly repaired bed. Damn good thing Tonks is great at Transfiguration! Harry thought frantically, as he struggled to remember what he had read in Consciousness Conjunctions about clearing his mind and a solitary purpose – near impossible when a single glance through the sheet showed him a liquid inferno across the shield that looked like something straight out of his nightmares of hell...

And then he heard it, even above the echoing bang of the platinum walls erupting across his vision, tracing the waves of silver fire buttressing the dome of liquid flame...

A single, echoing, gleeful laugh.

He knew that laugh.

It was Sirius.

His concentration faltered for an instant, but the visions were already coming...

He was on the top of the Astronomy Tower, his robes flapping madly in the wind as sheets of snow and rain lashed the tower like so many icy tentacles. His glasses were frozen on his nose, and before his unbelieving eyes, lightning and thunder split the sky.

Yet she seemed starkly unaffected by all of it. Her hair was matted, dirty blonde and soaked flat against her head. Her robes were tattered and ragged – how they got to be in that state, Harry didn't have a clue – and she was wearing no shoes. She looked nothing more like a drowned ghost, lost in the depths of a storm...

"No... please...." The words were slipping from his mouth before he knew he said them as he stepped out onto the balcony.

Luna shook her head mournfully. "We're both too far to come out, Isabelle. You know that as well as I." Her voice was not sad, but distant, as if she was speaking to someone who was in another plane of existence entirely...

"Please..." He was pleading now, and that horrified him even more – the fact he was driven to this, that it had come to this...

"Don't feel bad, Harry, it's not the end..." Luna whispered, the words somehow audible despite the storm.

And then she turned and looked at him, and Harry couldn't help but stare into her sky-blue eyes, now tinted beyond the shade of madness.

His hands started shaking – this hadn't happened last time. She hadn't looked – he hadn't seen this last time.

"The boundaries are down," Luna murmured, her voice off-key and singsong, sending chills racing down Harry's spine that had nothing to do with the wind. "So I merely... cross over..."

Her bare foot slipped on the wet stone as she turned, and the yell was torn from Harry's throat...

He looked down, but did not see the steep smooth precipice of Hogwarts. No, this height was jagged, broken stone. Marble torn away to reveal porous hissing rock beneath. The sky was the matte black of a storm, but no lightning crossed the sky.

No, all the lightning was far below, crossing the poisonous hellhole of a breached fortress-turned battleground. Fires too, in every colour of the rainbow, from sulfurous yellow to frigid blue to even bone white.

And there was screaming. A lot of screaming. And not every shriek came from a human throat. No, fouler creatures were falling in that tangled conflagration, falling to the cold silver of emotion...

Harry heard the screams, but there was something different. He knew that a month earlier, such screams would make him shy away from a suicidal plunge. But not this time – this time he wanted answers, the truth long sought. A truth he deserved, that he had killed for...

The words of the spell he needed was on his lips, and with a single step, he dove into hell...

Only to land in the darkness, lit only by flickering flames, silhouetting a wasted man in front of him. Only it wasn't a man, but someone Harry's age, his face gaunt, but somehow blurred, unrecognizable in the flickering light.

"Not nearly enough. What else you got?" Harry felt himself taunt, his mocking tones echoing an unearthly paeon in the ancient hall. He could feel the taste of hot blood in his mouth – and not his own.

The figure's wand rose, and a long black whip erupted from the end of it.

Harry's mouth twisted into a smirk. He knew the exact thing to say now.

"Ooh. Kinky."

The whip cracked – another new arrival to the scene – and exploded into blue-white flames, dripping liquid fire upon the filthy floor, stained by everyone who had crawled towards the pedestal...

The pedestal...

He only saw it now, casting the white circle of light upon the ceiling. Barely visible, but he could see the strange, curling mechanism upon it, built with magic that didn't seem quite real or possible. And for a split second, Harry could see the tiny statue of Hogwarts upon the ancient stone, designed with a meticulous hand that bordered on insanity.

A Hogwarts surrounded by turbulent mist. A Hogwarts sinking into the stone and casting white arcs of twisted energy into the air. A Hogwarts silhouetted by flames and screams...

And then it all shattered, the words forgotten in an instant of agony. Pain flooded his nerves, wracked his mind, lacerated his soul... he wanted to black out, to end it, to die, if only that would create some paltry escape...

And then he heard the voice. He didn't quite know it, but he could hear the contemplative, self-satisfied triumph, of a hard-won victory savoured and tasted in its full...

"Well, this won't do... there's hardly room for three in here. I think it's time to make a little... space."

And then Harry began to scream.

She didn't dare stop the ritual, but even the sweat pouring down her face didn't stop her from seeing the poisonous green glow surrounding the simulacrum's left arm – a glow that she thought she had eradicated.

She didn't stop chanting, but the words echoed piercingly in her mind.

Oh shit.

As before, golden light cascaded between the two bodies, but this time something sickly green slipped between them both, tainting the light into a tarnished bronze... yet she didn't dare look away, not even outwards through the hemisphere of fire and smoke surrounding them to see the newest white-blue flash...

The first tremor nearly caused her to lose her footing, but she kept chanting faster and faster, even despite the cold surge of fear filling her gut with every second. She had to do this, even as her desperate shield shuddered as jealous seconds sucked away its strength...

The lightning hit the hemisphere, and Tonks could hardly restrain her eyes from watching the electricity explode across the shield, but she had no choice. The thunder was coming, she was screaming the words now, only a few more seconds...

She spoke the final word as the lightning squeezed the hemisphere, filling it with a million cracks. It wavered, flickered, and Tonks felt her insides churning sickeningly as she watched the temporal distortion blink – and then die.

The explosion rocked Hogsmeade.

Sirius' eyes went wild with untamed emotions the second the Shrieking Shack exploded, and he flung an arm over his face as his Shield Charm exploded into existence.

A second later, his shield shook with impacts, as dirt, rock, and flaming wood collided with it. But it was only a single blast – and as he expected, most of the explosion had been internal, consuming everything within. After all, that was one of the little downsides to that particular shield: it didn't reflect, only absorb, and when it went, everything went with it.

"Oh, Moony," he whispered gleefully as he began running towards the flaming ruin, his boots slipping in the mud. "This would make you so happy... you won't have to hide anymore..."

The Shrieking Shack was less than rubble now. What wasn't burning was charred to a crisp, and rapidly disintegrating under the pounding waves of rain and wind. In the majority of cases, he would call it a done deal, but the Dark Lord had requested a head. Just to be safe.

It'd be hard to imagine anything and anyone surviving that blast, he thought to himself as he stepped through the once boarded-up and now well-incinerated door. But the old fool was relentless in placing protections on this place, so I wouldn't be surprised if...

The Bludgeoning Curse hit him without warning. Not nearly as hard as his own, but it was enough to bruise bones – and propel him back down the muddy hill.

His eyes went wide with sudden rage, and then narrowed as he saw her charge, clad only in her scanty bra and panties. A deadly foe, maybe, but unprotected, clumsy, and certainly delectable...

He pulled himself to his feet and drew his wand as a cruel smile crossed his face. Yes, he wanted her in his bed, cowed and beaten into the nubile slave he desired, but that would require a bit of work.

"I love a challenge!" Sirius howled, even as Tonks sprinted down the slope, rage and grief in her eyes.

The goat Patronus soared onto Dumbledore's balcony only a half second before the Headmaster of Hogwarts drew his wand.

"Black is here, Albus!" Aberforth's voice roared through the goat's mouth, competing with the thunderstorm over the school. "And the Shack –"

Dumbledore's eyes flashed, and his wand glowed white. In his other hand, he took a firm hold of Fawkes' tail. Through his magically enhanced spectacles, he could see the flames.

"You know where to go, Fawkes."

The phoenix let out a clarion call, and Dumbledore felt his feet lift the ground as the flaming bird surged into the air.

She dodged the twin black bolts that spiraled towards her, and slashed at the laughing Sirius again. But this time, the curse was far stronger – driven on her rage and an intangible wrench in her heart – and was capable of shattering bones to slivers.

Harry was gone – and she hadn't been able to save him in time. And with him went her chances – all of them.

"Vercundus!"

"Parietis," Sirius said with a deft wave, and the Bludgeoning Curse ricocheted away, smashing a fence post to kindling. "Come on, Nymphadora, I know you want me more than that!"

"FLAMMA LACERO!"

But Sirius deflected the flaming arc of fire easily – along with the next six hexes and curses Tonks threw at him. He replied back with a few nasty curses that Tonks barely managed to shield in time, but she could tell with one look at the man's face that she was overmatched.

Sirius was toying with her.

"Come on, Nymphadora!" Sirius shouted over the pounding rain as he transfigured a few shards of wood into knives and hurled them at her. "I thought Aurors were a challenge!"

"You want a challenge?" Tonks screamed, her tears mingling with the rain coursing down her face. "GELUMORSIS!"

The black cloud erupted from her wand, and the rain inside it froze solid into thousands of tiny particles of razor-edged ice.

Sirius only smiled more widely.

Her voice raw and wracked with pain as she screamed the spell, pointing her wand straight at Sirius. There was a bang like a gunshot – and then every single frozen raindrop shot at Sirius like a million tiny knives.

Sirius' eyes narrowed slightly before a wall of flames erupted between him and the deadly hail. The frozen rain hissed into nothingness, but Tonks knew better and immediately dove sideways – a good thing, as Sirius had just returned all of the frozen water in a boiling torrent laced with magic.

"You're getting better," Sirius hissed, blocking Tonks' next spell with hardly any attention. "But you're forgetting who has the reputation for transfiguration here!"

He flicked his wand skyward, and a heap of gravel and dirt was pulled from the road – and transfigured into flickering, razor-edged knives without a second word. Tonks' eyes only widened with horror as each knife blade began glowing acid green. Despite her rage, her gut plummeted as she prepared the best Shield Charm Moody had ever taught her, but from the amount of fine control that Sirius had, she knew it wouldn't likely be enough. How the hell does he even know these spells –

"The Dark Lord taught me well," Sirius answered her unspoken question, his eyes glinting madly. "After all, I was one of his greatest supporters, skilled in all manners arcane – how else could I call lightning –"

Lightning – that's it!

"ATRUM CHAIN LEVITAS!"

Forked and twisting bolts of electricity leapt from Tonks' wand, hitting the steel knives in mid-flight. The water only made the spell more effective, leaping from knife to knife to –

Pop.

"Gotcha."

She froze, as she felt the cold edge of a knife press against her bare throat. The glare had blinded her – she hadn't seen him Disapparate...

"You're mine," Sirius whispered, and the knife glowed blue in his hands.

Tonks responded like she would to anyone in her situation.

She slammed her ankle into Sirius' groin.

But somehow, with a dexterity that Tonks knew only came from training, Sirius had shoved the blow aside, into the meat of his thigh. He grabbed her wrist before she could ram her fist into his solar plexus, but pulling backwards, she smashed her forehead into Sirius' face, and she could feel the sodden crunch of a breaking nose. His grip loosened, and she pulled herself away –

Only for Sirius to drive his glowing knife straight into the meat of Tonks' shoulder.

Tonks had only been placed under the Imperius Curse in training, and she remembered the blankness that she had felt. But this was no subtle, blankly vague happiness. This was an iron will of sheer corruption slamming into her mind, repressing it, attacking it, corrupting it...

She staggered, her eyes rolling back into her head as she struggled to remain in control of her limbs. She was dimly aware of the cold hilt sticking like a thorn out of her shoulder, and that one of her bra straps

had been severed. Hot sticky blood was flowing down her bare breast...

Her wand dropped into the mud, and she felt her mind mist over as she looked dimly up at Sirius' face, set with lust and madness. He slammed her bodily into the wall of the shed, his hand sliding up to grab her chest –

"ACCIO SIRIUS BLACK!"

She could hardly see the figure, her eyes were already glazing over as the mental presence forced itself deeper and deeper into her brain, but she could see Sirius being pulled away by the screamed spell...

"But who..." she whispered to herself, her voice hardly her own. "Who would strike my Sirius... my Lord Black..."

The rain trickled across her face, but she could hardly feel its chill. Numbness was filling her limbs, a heaviness that she couldn't understand... like she couldn't understand why she couldn't remember where she was... or who she was... or why she had been here...

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

Her eyes snapped wide open, and she could feel the foulness in her mind reassert itself, but something – something golden – was blocking, a tenuous circular web protecting her core from the darkness...

"Harry..." she whispered through white lips. Her fingers, stiff and rigid, clenched around the dagger and with an agonized scream, she yanked it free.

It was like a massive veil had been lifted, and the colours seemed all the more vivid. The flames surrounding the Shrieking Shack had only grown higher, and two figures were dueling. Tonks could tell one of them was Lord – no, Sirius Black.

The other was a woman, nearly nude but for the ragged, barely-fitting Auror robe. She was pretty enough, but there was something otherworldly about her. Perhaps it was the fact that she was matching Sirius Black spell for spell, a violent offensive that even seemed to catch him slightly off-guard.

Or maybe it was because her eyes were blazing metallic silver in the harsh light, visible even from Tonks' distance...

Tonks could hardly restrain the rush of relief and fear that surged through her body as she realized the truth. The ritual had worked: Harry was alive –

And his deranged godfather would have no compunctions killing him on the spot.

She screamed out a warning, but Sirius was already raising his wand, his hoarse voice audible even through the roar of the flames and the pounding rain.

"AVADA –"

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The second word of the curse died on Sirius' lips as a massive silvery stag erupted from the wand. It was big, bigger than it ever should have been, and easily twice the height of a man. The stag pawed the ground for a few moments – and then charged.

But why charge with a Patronus? Tonks thought frantically as she began running, trying to hold her bra with a modicum of modesty as she ran up the hill. It's incorporeal, it can't do anything –

The words died on her lips as the stag's horns, easily as thick as the knife she had been stabbed with, plunged through Sirius' chest and stomach...

And he screamed. Blood exploded from Sirius' chest, the torrents silhouetting impossibly against the wall of flames behind them. The stag, sensing victory, lifted its massive head – with Sirius still impaled

and howling upon it – and reared it back with a simple, unbelievable shrug of its silvery muscles, sending Sirius flying...

Straight into a heap of firewood miraculously unconsumed by the raging fires only inches away from it.

Tonks' mouth fell open as the simulacrum's eyes blazed golden for a second more – and then it collapsed in the dirt. Only a few feet away, Harry's naked body stirred feebly.

"Harry!" The word was torn from her lips as she rushed to his side. "What the... how did you..."

"I know," Harry whispered. "It all made sense... and I had to... Sirius!"

Tonks' eyes went wide as he scrambled to his feet and ran to the wood pile, where Sirius was lying, broken and bleeding out fast.

"Harry, wait, he's –"

But Harry had already thrown himself on his godfather, who was coughing up thick spurts of blood, running down the side of his face.

"I'm so sorry, Sirius," he whispered, barely audible in the pounding rain, but Tonks heard the words, and the curse died on her lips.

Sirius looked up, and for the first time in a long time, she saw the spark in his eyes flicker to life.

"I know," he murmured. "Thank you, Harry. You saved me."

He gave a great shuddering breath, the rain mixing with the blood on his face. Then he closed his eyes, and moved no more.

Aberforth Dumbledore closed the door to his bedroom and let out a strange noise – not quite a sigh of relief, but not quite a snort either.

"So?"

Aberforth roughly pushed his glasses up higher on his nose and met his brother's eyes as he trudged towards the armoire in the corner of the tiny room.

"Did you have any luck?" Albus Dumbledore asked concernedly.

"Pomfrey'll have more luck than I will," Aberforth grunted as he shoved his cloak onto a hook. "She took over."

"And Severus?"

Aberforth gave his brother an exasperated glare. "What do you think?"

"I thought as much," Albus said softly. "It's a shame –"

"Hardly, because it being a shame would require that Snape's good behavior in this matter be expected," Aberforth interrupted, slamming his armoire shut with an audible snap. "Of course he wasn't going to come, not even to gloat."

Albus blinked twice, but never took his eyes off of his younger brother. "Will he live?"

"I was amazed he was anything close to alive when he was dragged in here," Aberforth retorted. "Multiple chest wounds, holes in his lungs and liver, his spine snapped in three places... you're lucky he's only in shock and not dead."

"Poppy is skilled."

"She'll need to be, if you ever want Sirius Black to walk again," Aberforth shot back. "As it is, he's in a pretty damn deep coma, and he won't be coming out for some time. He's off your active duty roster."

"At least he's alive," Albus said softly, a very real note of concern in his voice. "And back on our side."

"How can you be so sure?" Aberforth's voice was skeptical. "It could be a ruse."

"Sirius Black was possessed – of that, both Harry and I are certain," Albus said firmly, folding his fingers as he watched his brother sit opposite him. "How he was controlled becomes a different question."

Aberforth eyed his brother suspiciously. "I thought Headquarters was sealed off, and before that well-protected."

"There was a leak."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Were you so eager to come to Headquarters?"

Aberforth glared at his brother. "You leave a man trapped in a place like that, you're asking for trouble, Albus. I told you it was a stupid idea to try that bluff –"

"I would have had no way of knowing that Voldemort would attempt such a tactic as spectral possession," Albus replied evenly. "In fact, I'm interested in how he discovered that knowledge at all. But given the location, it does not surprise me he tested the spells on Headquarters first. After all, Hogwarts was the only home he knew, and he didn't dare risk catastrophic failure."

Aberforth crossed his arms over his chest. "Didn't he get it anyways? I'm assuming there's a reason why you arrived late on the scene."

Albus didn't answer, and Aberforth snorted with disgust.

"Can't say I'm surprised."

"Aberforth, I would have told you –"

"No, you wouldn't have," Aberforth said flatly, "but I've come to expect that by now."

"You know what is at stake —"

"Damned straight I do," Aberforth spat, rising to his feet. "Potter's soul, or at least his life."

"I've let him walk his own path," Albus replied grimly. "Harry has made his own choices —"

"So he thinks," Aberforth said darkly. "So it's the Auror girl, then."

"She is more loyal to Harry than to the Order —"

"And I would guess you had nothing at all to do with that?" Aberforth cut him off harshly.

Albus' eyes flashed, and Aberforth was reminded for a split second of a night over fifty years earlier, when his brother had made the choice to finally pursue his old friend and best him in single combat. It was the same, terrible look.

And here I thought something had changed.

"You're ruining Harry's life."

"I'm letting him live by his own choices and decisions —"

"But you haven't told him everything," Aberforth said accusingly. "Merlin forsaken, Albus, he's fifteen!"

"And he's already behaved with more maturity than most," Albus replied curtly.

Aberforth ignored the subtle barb as he glared at his brother. "Then if he's mature, he deserves the whole truth. You owe him that much."

"And if I had my choice, I would tell him everything," Dumbledore said calmly, "but there is an unshielded link to Voldemort's mind in Harry's

head. If Harry came to know the whole truth, Voldemort could use it, and then none of us would have hope. As it is, Harry and Voldemort both know the contents of the prophecy – and right now, that is all Harry needs." Albus closed his eyes and rubbed his temple with two long fingers. For a second, Aberforth could see the great weariness in his brother's face, in his darkened eyes and drooping brow, but then it was gone, replaced by a shield.

Aberforth knew that shield – it was the one his brother always used, when he wanted to look more than human, but was really less.

"I need to speak to Harry," Albus said quietly, slowly rising to his feet. "Will you guarantee us some privacy?"

Aberforth met his brother's eyes for a long few seconds before sighing and turning away.

When his brother deserved a response, he would get it.

"I'm amazed he's alive," Harry murmured, cradling the bottle of Butterbeer in both hands as he sat opposite Tonks in a dank corner of the Hog's Head. He could still smell burnt earth and cinders, but he suspected that smell wouldn't go away anytime soon.

"So am I," Tonks replied, rubbing her eyes as she pulled the cloak tighter around her. It wasn't much, barely covering her shredded Auror robes, but in the chilly bar, any bit of heat was precious. "You really hit him hard there... how did you know the Patronus would do something like that?"

"As soon as it clicked that he was possessed, it... well, it seemed like a wild guess to me," Harry admitted after a few seconds. "That spectre was sociopathic, undoubtedly evil – why wouldn't a Patronus be able to drive it off. It's not like I've had a good chance to try any good banishing spells, and fighting against Sirius..." He shuddered. "I was too lucky as it is. He's good. No wonder they thought he was Voldemort's second-in-command."

"Of course he's good," Tonks replied with another shiver as she rubbed her newly healed shoulder – Madam Pomfrey had been able

to heal the wound in seconds, despite its depth. "He survived the first generator of the Order – and knowing how Sirius is, he wouldn't have shied from a fight."

She carefully looked around before lowering her voice. "We don't have a lot of time. Where did you hide your simulacrum?"

"Woodshed," Harry replied immediately, "along with the books and my Invisibility Cloak. Frankly, I'm amazed they weren't burnt to cinders."

"I'm not," Tonks said, taking a swig of her Firewhiskey, her hair going sodden brown as she took a deep breath. "Most wizards are smart enough to make their spellbooks fireproof, particularly any they're using a ritual. After all, those things are hard to get, and a fire in a failed ritual is the worst way for them to go."

Harry clenched the bottle tighter as he leaned close to Tonks. "And did we fail? We both know something went wrong."

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

Tonks shoved the voice back while keeping her expression perfectly blank. "Probably something to do with the shielding magic I used, but I haven't seen any problems yet. I mean, you've got control of the simulacrum without difficulty –"

His hand was a blur, and Tonks felt Harry's shaking grip on her shoulder. "Tonks, when I'm in that body, it's different," he whispered. "There's more muscle memory than usual, I can control the body much easier... and there's something else."

That explains why he was able to fight Sirius so quickly, but there's still something missing, Tonks thought quickly. He couldn't have fought Sirius to a standstill without...

"Harry," she carefully asked, "what spells were you using against Sirius in that fight?"

Harry swallowed hard, and his grip on Tonks' shoulder grew tighter. "Nothing I can remember all too well, it was too damned fast... but I hadn't seen them before. And they didn't feel right... I could taste bile in my mouth whenever I was casting them –"

His voice trailed off, because Tonks had gone rigid with realization, her hair and eyes going matte black in seconds.

"Tonks –"

"I knew I hadn't gotten rid of all of it," Tonks whispered, her eyes flashing to Harry's left forearm. "But it's not showing on you, but there's still probably a trace left –"

Harry went pale. "You're talking about the Dark Mark – I thought you got rid of it when you were shaping the body!"

"I must have missed something, there must have been a root to the enchantment that I hadn't seen – fuck!" Tonks jerked herself out of Harry's grip and slammed her fist on the table, causing her glass to rattle. "Damn it, why wasn't I sure it was gone!"

"Tonks, there's nothing you could have done, this magic's beyond us both and we know it," Harry said quickly, but his voice betrayed him as he looked quickly at his arm, as if he were expecting the tattoo to twist and erupt onto his skin from the blood below. "Do you.... Do you think it's going to have any other negative effects?"

"Can't be sure," Tonks muttered. "At the very least, it might burn if You-Know-Who presses it, or give you the magical competence to cast the Dark Mark – hell, given the other spells you were casting, that's a genuine possibility. At the worst... damn it, Harry, I don't know how bad it could be. We could ask Snape."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You're kidding."

"Of course I am." She took a deep breath as she downed the rest of her drink. "In any case, until you get your hands on the rest of your money, we won't be able to afford simulamancy, let alone risk it again."

"Keep your voice down," Harry warned. "I think Dumbledore's coming —"

"What are we going to —"

Her words had been cut off, because Harry had just kissed her full on the mouth. His arm had slid around her waist and he was pulling her closer even as the doorknob twisted...

But you're not going to let him have all the fun, now, are you?

She could feel something rising inside of her, and she returned his kiss passionately, her hand darting forward to pull away the ragged T-shirt...

Dumbledore coughed loudly.

They broke apart, but Harry shot Tonks a wink as he turned to face Dumbledore, a flush creeping into his cheeks.

"Sorry, Professor, I... uh, well, I..."

"I quite understand, Harry," Dumbledore said, a hint of a grin crossing his face as he took a seat at the table. "If anything, I should allow you to continue."

The funny feeling in Tonks' gut urged her to follow on that train of logic, but she forced it back and pulled her cloak as modestly as she could around her.

"Sirius is going to be okay?"

The smile left Dumbledore's face. "I do not know," he replied quietly, the glimmer in his eyes dim as he met Harry's anxious gaze. For a short second, Tonks could see the old man's hand tremor. "His wounds are severe, but Madam Pomfrey is the best Healer I have ever known. If anyone can save him, it will be her."

"How long?"

"At least a week until he'll be able to awaken," Dumbledore replied, "presuming all goes well – and it may not."

"It could have gone well if you had gotten to us in time," Harry growled.

Tonks tensed – an argument with Dumbledore was the last thing both of them needed right now – but the old Headmaster simply nodded.

"I agree, although the situation was beyond my control. I was stymied by the same force that delayed me last time. Even with Fawkes, I could not bypass it." Dumbledore folded his hands carefully. "However, I cannot deny that you performed exceptionally well."

"I got lucky, Professor –"

"It was not a stratagem I would recommend in the future, Harry," Dumbledore said carefully. "The Patronus Charm is powerful, and can indeed be used in the manner that you suggest to banish the ghost from the possessed, but if you intend to save him, it is terribly risky."

"It's not like I had time for any banishing spells," Harry replied defensively, "and he – the ghost – was going to kill me if I hadn't used my Patronus. I don't think he was expecting I knew that spell..."

"Do we have any idea who the ghost actually was?" Tonks interrupted, her eyes fixed on Dumbledore. "Or how the hell it got into Sirius?"

Dumbledore's face looked grave as he folded his fingers. "There has been a leak within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for a long time – you both know this. What we haven't known, until now, is how Lord Voldemort has utilized it. If anything, if my hypothesis is correct, it was an ingenious strategy on his part."

"You're talking about that paper with the location of Headquarters that they found on Kingsley and restored," Tonks said sharply. "I thought

You-Know... okay, fine, Voldemort used that paper to seal off the entire street because he didn't know the exact street address."

"Or he did," Harry said suddenly, "and used it to break into Grimmauld Place and magically compel a ghost to possess Sirius." He looked at Dumbledore. "Someone could have told Voldemort that Sirius could be hiding out there, even if it was our Headquarters."

"Unfortunately, the Fidelius Charm is a little more foolproof than that, Harry," Dumbledore said heavily, "but Voldemort is much smarter. I suspect he had an insider within the house the day it was sealed to us and Sirius was possessed."

"Snape," Harry snarled.

"He has an alibi, Harry," Dumbledore said reprovingly, "one I and the students in his classroom at that time can vouch for. In this case, however, we're looking for an enemy just as dangerous."

He frowned and turned to Tonks. "Are you familiar with Sirius' old house-elf Kreacher?"

"The house-elf?" Harry exclaimed. "You've got to be bloody kidding me! I thought house-elves were forbidden from turning on their masters anyways –"

"And I'm quite sure that Kreacher would be punishing himself if indeed he knew the truth," Dumbledore said grimly. "But that house elf hated Sirius, and Sirius certainly had no love for a creature that represented everything about his past life that he loathed."

"Are you suggesting Kreacher let Voldemort in?" Tonks asked incredulously. "There's no way that thing is that powerful –"

"It didn't need to be," Dumbledore said, closing his eyes and shaking his head with disappointment. "All Kreacher needed to do was leave the house, go to the one remaining pureblood relative he could speak to – conveniently Narcissa Malfoy – and return with a parcel for his master, never knowing what was inside of it."

"Sirius would never take anything Kreacher gave him, not even for a second," Tonks said with a frown. "Did the house elf plant it on Sirius?"

"It looks to be that way," Dumbledore replied. "Not the focus of the spell itself – that was here at Hogwarts, I suspect, where all the other possession... incidents took place – but a beacon to draw a hungry spirit in for a second chance at life."

"That sounds like an astronomical amount of power to be transferred over a very long distance," Tonks said, her eyes narrowed skeptically as her hair went grey-silver.

"Must be one hell of a beacon," Harry muttered, "or one hell of a ghost..."

"An interesting proposal, Harry," Dumbledore said suddenly, his eyes snapping back to Harry, "and perhaps more correct than we both realize. I have a hypothesis, and with a bit of Miss Tonks' description of the fights that you have had with him, I believe I might have an idea who the ghost is."

"I thought there weren't any ghosts in Grimmauld Place," Harry said carefully. "Only that murderous old ghoul that Fred and George threw out near the end of the summer."

"Didn't think you knew about that, we were trying to keep quiet," Tonks muttered. "I helped with that, by the way."

"I'm sure," Harry shot back, but he grinned.

"I will need Sirius' confirmation to prove my theory, but I believe there's one ghost lurking in Grimmauld Place that is both intelligent enough to keep himself very well hidden, and murderous enough to serve Lord Voldemort in this manner," Dumbledore said evenly, drawing his wand and tapping the center of the table lightly.

With a murmured word, an image of a middle-aged heavy-set, somewhat balding man appeared. He was large, but his girth was muscle instead of fat, and he moved with the grace of a much

younger wizard. His face was strikingly handsome, with very well-defined features complementing his thick, dark goatee, which was as well groomed as his short, straight hair.

Tonks swore under her breath. She would know that face anywhere – her mother had described in impeccable, horrifying detail. "That damned..."

"And from Sirius' testimony, we all thought he was," Dumbledore finished grimly. "After all, Druella Rosier's ritual was reportedly designed to send him straight into a state of eternal torment."

"Rosier?" Harry asked, running a hand through his hair. "Who is this?"

"This, Harry, is Cygnus Black, Sirius' uncle," Dumbledore said, a strangely forced note in his voice, as if the Headmaster was visibly trying to remain as calm as possible. "The father of Bellatrix Lestrange, Narcissa Malfoy, and –"

"Andromeda Tonks," Tonks hissed. Her hair had gone blood red, and her eyes were flickering in that direction. "My mother. He was my grandfather – not that I would ever want to meet the fucker."

Harry swallowed hard at the look of pure hatred on Tonks' face. "What did he do?"

"Cygnus Black was a blood purist of the worst kind," Dumbledore said grimly, his eyes burning with disgust. "He believed the only blood fit for his line was that of his own loins – that of another Black. If what was believed was true, he had already brutally raped his eldest daughter – Bellatrix – before he was killed."

"Didn't get a chance at my mom, though," Tonks whispered savagely. "Thank Merlin for that."

"She got away?"

"My mom ran away when she was sixteen, just like Sirius," Tonks said, breathing very fast as she stared hatefully at the slowly rotating

image. "That put that raping monster in a bit of a hard spot, because he didn't dare touch Narcissa. No, no, she was Druella's favourite, and even Cygnus didn't dare cross a Rosier – that family would have no qualms ripping him to shreds and feeding him to their Fire Crabs..."

"So, if Sirius' story is to be believed," Dumbledore finished, "Cygnus Black was caught in bed with Walburga Black, a widow at that time, by Druella. After having a relation of hers – a Death Eater named Evan Rosier – beat Cygnus into a pulp, she utilized a very nasty piece of Dark magic to damn him to eternal torment at the site of his greatest crime."

"And you think he was the ghost?" Harry asked slowly.

"It would fit the spell's description," Dumbledore said simply.

"Also makes sense, considering if you hadn't summoned him out of the way, he would have had no qualms molesting me, Harry," Tonks added, unable to stop the tremor from creeping into her voice. "Thanks for that, by the way."

"And the spells –"

"Sirius is a powerful wizard in his own right, although the majority of the magic was not his style, although well within his ability to cast," Dumbledore said calmly. "Cygnus would have simply enabled the skills that were utilized."

"What about this beacon?" Harry asked quickly. "Is there a chance that Sirius still has the thing?"

"Possibly, but I highly doubt it," Dumbledore replied, and Tonks was startled to hear a tiny note of frustration in his voice. "Voldemort would have reclaimed the item for future use."

"Sirius can probably describe it, though," Harry pointed out, undaunted. "And we have the entire Hogwarts library to identify it, and that could give us something."

"At this particular point in time, Harry, that would not be the most efficient method for solving this problem," Dumbledore replied. "I suspect that an expert with such esoteric objects would have better luck identifying it."

Harry and Tonks exchanged glances. "Cassane?"

"He said he'd remain neutral, and he'll know this isn't neutrality," Harry said sharply.

"Cassane is also a man who likes an intellectual challenge, and identifying such an object would be such a challenge," Dumbledore replied reasonably. "I feel confident it would not be an issue persuading him –"

He stopped speaking, because a massive silvery lynx had bounded through the cracked window of the bar and landed on the table, facing Dumbledore.

"What the –"

"Kingsley's Patronus!" Tonks whispered blankly. "What the hell could have possibly gone wrong now –"

"Barnabus Cuffe has been arrested on charges of contract violation and extortion," the lynx said in Kingsley's slow, measured voice, but they could all hear the note of satisfaction in his voice. "He has been taken to the Ministry, and his legal counsel has been... delayed, somewhat."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Scrimgeour got him?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a swift look of slightly surprise that soon dissolved into pride. "Very good, Harry."

Tonks could tell that Harry was trying not to let on how much Dumbledore's words had meant to him, but she could see the slight rise of colour in his cheeks.

"But we have a problem," the lynx continued, his tone picking up pace. "He's already being interrogated."

Tonks' eyes flew wide open. "What? By whom? Who has the time in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement these days –"

The lynx fixed Dumbledore with what looked like a steely gaze, something so intentional that Tonks knew Kingsley had done it to make a point.

"Dumbledore, it's Dmitri Kemester. He's alive."

Harry surged to his feet. "What?"

"Umbridge somehow arranged to have him revived and back on the field – it's beyond terrible, Dumbledore, what she did to bring him back, she should have let him die –"

"I killed him!" Harry snarled furiously. "I fucking killed him! It was over!"

" – And now he's in the room with Cuffe, and the conniving bastard's scared to death that Kemester's going to eat him alive," the Patronus finished.

"What does he want, Kingsley?" Dumbledore whispered, already knowing that the Auror had anticipated the question and prepared the Patronus with the answer.

"The truth."

There was a very awkward silence as the two of them walked up the slippery steps to the Owlery, a silence that had persisted since she had asked him to accompany her.

Finally, Hermione cleared her throat. "Thank you, Ron."

"For what?" Ron snapped irritably, twirling his wand in his fingers clumsily.

"For coming with me," Hermione said in a rush, "and letting me borrow Pigwidgeon. I really..." She swallowed hard.

"I get it," Ron replied curtly. He didn't lean against the wall, like he usually would – but then again, given that the entire room reeked distinctly of owl droppings, it was an intelligent choice. "You couldn't have asked Harry."

"Do you... do you know where he is?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"No," Ron said flatly as Pigwidgeon flew over, hooting madly. "Better let me tie this on – Pig's too hyper right now."

"T-That's fine," Hermione said quickly, passing Ron the small envelope.

"Why couldn't this have waited until morning again?" Ron asked after a few seconds, listening to the peals of thunder shake the small tower. "I mean, it's late, and the last thing we need right now is detention from McGonagall."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "I... well, I really don't think it's anyone else's business –"

"I'm here with you, and that makes it my business," Ron snapped. "What's going on, Hermione?"

"It's just a letter, all right?" Hermione retorted, snatching Pigwidgeon away from Ron and carefully tying the letter to the tiny bird's leg with a bit of string. "To someone who could help us." She looked back up at Ron. "You know, with the attacks..."

Ron's face was a flat mask. Most of the candles in the tiny circular room were guttered, and the few that were lit cast long shadows across his face, making it appear almost carved. "You're keeping secrets, Hermione. What's the matter, you don't trust me now either?"

"That's not fair," Hermione said quietly, yet she was breathing very fast. "Harry might have made things difficult for both of us, but that shouldn't drive us apart –"

"Why don't you trust me, Hermione?" Ron asked suddenly. He finally met her eyes, and she was shocked to see something else there – pain. Genuine hurt.

"It's not... it's not like you've trusted me!" Hermione said, swallowing hard as she gripped Pigwidgeon a little tighter than she should have. The owl let out a little hoot of pain, but Hermione ignored it. "I mean, going behind both Harry's back and mine with your crazy plan and learning Dark magic –"

"Did you honestly think I was going to leave my brother in the clutches of a monster like Umbridge?" Ron asked furiously as the tower shook from a particularly close rumble of thunder.

"No," Hermione replied in a small voice barely audible, "but I wish you would have trusted me, talked to me about it. You're my friend, Ron... my only friend now, the way Harry is... and I'm not going to throw that away."

Ron clenched his fist and turned towards one of the few filthy windows in the tiny room. Rain streaked the glass, and he could see the lightning dancing over the Quidditch pitch...

The door of the room opened suddenly, and Ron spun on his heel, his wand already drawn –

"Easy there, Ron," Ernie said, raising his hands in surprise. "A little nervous tonight? It's just me."

"What are you doing sending an owl at this time of the night?" Ron asked roughly, shoving his wand in his pocket as he forced back embarrassment. God, I'm getting more paranoid than Harry these days...

Ernie winced. "My mother's birthday," he said apologetically, pulling a rather heavy package from his bag as his barn owl flew down. "Family would never forgive me if I forgot."

Ron turned away, the words ringing in his ear as he looked out the window. Family would never forgive me... but I can't just abandon him!

"What did you get her?" Hermione asked, trying to break the awkward silence.

"Didn't see you there, Hermione, nice to see one of the best students in our year around," Ernie replied pleasantly. "As for the gifts, just a couple books I know you'd probably appreciate. There's..."

Ron tuned Ernie's rambling out as he moved to another window, this one with a view of the castle. The rain was coming down harder than ever, drumming on the stone roof like hammer blows...

His gaze stopped, and he carefully drew his wand. I was sure I saw...

"Impervius!"

Immediately some of the frost and water lifted from the window – not much, but enough to confirm what Ron had suspected.

Someone was walking around the seventh floor corridor. Someone with white-blond hair...

He looked over to where Ernie was prattling on. "Hermione, we've got to go. Send Pigwidgeon out, I want to check something."

"What's going on?" Ernie asked with interest, as his owl took off into the high, dung-encrusted rafters with the package towards the single open window.

"Nothing important –"

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Ron, if you need my help, why not bring Ernie along? Three's always better than two, we both know that."

Ron clenched his jaw. Oh, he knew that all right.

"Fine. Let's go chase a ferret."

"I need to get into that meeting," Harry muttered as he began to pace. "I can't let Kemester rip Cuffe to shreds! With our luck, that'll happen and Cuffe will get released!"

"There might not be much we can do about that," Tonks replied briskly, as she rifled through the pile of clothes that Dumbledore had conjured out of mid-air and dumped onto the table. "Dumbledore's already moving –"

"If he can get the people he needs in the Daily Prophet, it won't be enough," Harry muttered, shoving a chair aside out of frustration. "Cuffe will have them back under his boot heel. That plan will be finished, and that damned deal I made with Scrimgeour will be precisely worthless."

Tonks' eyes snapped to Harry as her hair stopped in mid colour-change. "You're talking about going to the Ministry now."

"Simulacrum, obviously. As Desdame, I can get past a lot of the security in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement –"

"Not nearly all of it, you'll need me to come with you," Tonks interrupted.

"And as an involved party in dealing with Cuffe, I'm fairly certain he and I can discuss a deal," Harry finished, his eyes snapping to Aberforth's room. "Do you think he'll have any witch robes that'll fit Desdame?"

"No, and this is not a good idea!" Tonks said, alarm filling her voice. "It's too risky to try simulamancy without knowing everything that went wrong last time!"

"We can't afford to wait!" Harry snapped, and Tonks could tell her temper was already beginning to strain.

"Listen to me, Harry, as the one who conducted the ritual, I know something went wrong with this," Tonks said, very real anger creeping into her voice as she shoved aside a heap of clothes. "You'll

be risking both our lives – and yes, I said both – if you try this. I'm in this as much as you are."

Harry frowned. "You think something went wrong at your end –"

"I don't know, and that's the damn point!" Tonks exclaimed, carefully letting a note of fear creep into her voice. She wasn't going to deny that she was worried, and not just for Harry this time. She really didn't want to tell Harry that she was hearing a voice inside her head. Not now, at least. "We can't afford to rush into this –"

"And we don't have the time not to rush into this," Harry interrupted.

"What about Cygnus Black's ghost?" Tonks asked desperately. "You heard what Dumbledore said, you didn't destroy that spectre."

"So?"

"So what if it comes back?" Tonks asked angrily. "Are you just going to let Sirius get possessed again – or worse, let yourself get possessed by that monster?"

"Tonks, in every encounter I've had with those damned things, I've learned one thing," Harry said curtly, "and that is that none of those damned things can get into my head. And you seem awfully worried about that ghost – we don't even have any proof it's still around!"

"If you had heard any of the stories my Mum told me," Tonks said tightly, keeping a tight lid on her own frustration, "you'd feel the exact same way. This is a terrible idea, Harry. If anything, you should let me go as Desdame –"

"You'd need backup."

"I'm an Auror! And it's not as if I wouldn't have backup – Kingsley would be there"

"I don't trust Shacklebolt, and neither should you," Harry growled. "I'm going, Tonks, and right now, I'd need all the help I can get. Are you coming with me? Hell, you said I'd need you."

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER...

Tonks closed her eyes and shoved the voice away. Damned simulamancy... or maybe that fucking dagger Sirius used was poisoned... either way, I've got to stop this...

"Tonks, we have to go!" Harry exclaimed, trying to meet her eyes. "There's no time, we have to move! Grab the most professional-looking thing you can find in there and let's move!"

She took a deep breath and turned away. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a shadow behind the door that she knew led to Aberforth's room.

"Fine," she said grimly. "Let's get this done."

"You know the Dark Lord has given me orders –"

"I thought I fucking told you, Nott, not to start talking until we're under cover!" Malfoy snarled, rounding on the smugly smiling Slytherin with a furious look on his face. "So shut the fuck up already!"

"And what was wrong with the library?" Nott asked, his voice plainly irritated.

"I'm thinking we were overheard," Malfoy growled as he peered carefully around the darkened corner, "and either way, with Moody and McGonagall on the prowl, I'm not taking chances."

"So where are we going?" Zabini asked, following a few steps back with a bored expression on his face.

"I found us an abandoned classroom up here," Malfoy said curtly. "It'll do."

"What about the chamber?" Nott hissed. "It's far more secure than any classroom –"

Malfoy quickened his pace unconsciously. "No."

"You know what I think, Malfoy?" Nott asked, picking up his own pace until it matched Malfoy's. "I think you don't want to go down there. How's your new vagina coming along, you miserable excuse for –"

His temper snapped, and a second later, he felt a stinging in his knuckles and he could see Nott stumbling back into the wall of the narrow corridor, his hand rising to his nose. He raised his hand for a second strike –

"Since when is Malfoy a girl?"

His wand was out in seconds and pointing to the end of the corridor. There, twenty feet back, were Weasley, Granger, and Macmillian. There was an insufferable smirk on Weasley's face – something that immediately made Malfoy want to curse him.

So he did.

"Confringo!"

The spell streaked down the corridor – and bounced off the invisible shield. Malfoy's eyes narrowed. He hadn't expected a Shield Charm, but apparently the Mudblood wasn't useless after all...

"So, you didn't answer my question, Malfoy!" Weasley shouted, his smirk growing wider as he raised his wand. "Since when did you have a –"

"You can't fight here, Draco!" Zabini hissed urgently, his eyes scanning the corridor. "It's a shooting gallery, and we've still got twenty feet till the next turn! There's no cover!"

Malfoy ignored Zabini and raised his wand in turn. "And you would have such intimate knowledge about a lady from whom, Weasel? Was it Granger? After all, bushes do grow in the mud –"

"You disgusting brat!" Macmillian shouted, his face going crimson with righteous indignity. "Stupefy!"

Malfoy blocked the Stunning Spell, carefully deflecting it into the wall where it fizzled, but a cruel smile was growing on his face. Finally, something he could relieve his tension upon – it was almost refreshing. "Or, you know, I've always heard that siblings like to be intimate with each other –"

"Vercundus!"

Malfoy parried the curse, but he had felt the fury behind that attack and for a moment, a cold pit of worry began to form in his gut. This could get somewhat interesting, but the last thing I need is...

"So what are you doing slinking around the castle, Malfoy?" Weasley shouted. "Looking for more people's lives to ruin?"

"Well, you're doing a damn fine job of ruining yours, so why should I expend the effort?" Zabini called back mockingly. "I mean, how the hell do you get the slime and dirt out of your clothes from being associated with beings less than filth –"

"Or finding new girls to torture?"

The Mudblood's voice rang in the corridor, and for a few seconds, Malfoy let the accusation hang in the air. It was his chance – he could point the finger at Nott, and it would be over in a heartbeat. His hands would be clean... mostly.

"I don't know what you're talking –"

"Don't lie!" Granger screamed. "You did it, I heard the truth, and I have proof!"

The pit of worry in his stomach had blossomed into full-fledged panic, but he struggled to keep his face an expressionless mask. Outside, he could hear the thunder pounding the school.

"You were the one, Draco Malfoy?" Macmillian shouted, raising his wand. "You murderous... you perverted freak!"

Malfoy looked only at Granger, ignoring the Hufflepuff's bellowing. "You have no proof, Mudblood, and nobody would believe you even if you did!"

"Harry would," Weasley snarled. "And even I wouldn't want to get in his way –"

"I'll expose you!" Macmillian roared, his eyes blazing with a righteous fury visible twenty feet away. "Your own House will disown you, and you'll deserve the just punishment Dumbledore will give you –"

"Fuck, this is taking too long," Nott spat. "Gelumorsus!"

A rush of blackness exploded from Nott's wand, spraying down the hallway like a Muggle fire extinguisher, and even as the temperature plummeted and a nearby window shattered, Malfoy's mouth twisted into a tiny smile. Let's see you get past that –

"Incendio!"

Flames erupted from Weasley's – Weasley's – wand, and the cloud of blackness shivered to a halt, even beginning to dissipate...

"Run!"

The option didn't come a second too soon. He started backpedalling, firing every curse he could remember into the black cloud to drive them back –

"Into the secret passage!" Nott snarled, grabbing Zabini's collar as they rounded the corner and pulling him headfirst into a heavy wooden door. Malfoy braced for the heavy sound of flesh on wood, but Zabini fell right through the illusion, Nott right behind him. Finally, after firing one last hex into the blackness and cursing one of the torches to explode, spraying shrapnel all across the corridor, he dove into the darkness.

He heard running sounds, but he stayed quiet, listening for the inevitable.

"They're gone. Damn it!"

"We thought before Malfoy's got an Invisibility Cloak, he can certainly afford it," Granger said bitterly. "He's likely hiding – either that or he can run really fast."

"Him?" Weasley asked incredulously, and Malfoy heard the sounds of a muttered Reparo. "I wouldn't count on that, why do you think he was using so many curses to stall us?"

"Nice Shield Charms, Ron," Macmillian said, very real appreciation in his voice. "And how did you know the counter-curse for that black cloud spell?"

"A very good question," Nott whispered, his eyes bright with suspicion.

"You know... I, uh... well, I've seen Harry beat it before," Weasley said, trying to sound modest despite himself.

"Well, he can't hide forever," Granger said briskly, "and his little escape act here only confirms his guilt."

"I'm just curious why he punched that little weed Nott in the nose," Macmillian mused. "It hardly matters now, though. Hermione, if you can get me the proof and all the evidence, I'll expose Malfoy before lunch tomorrow."

"Let's circle around the corridors a bit first," Weasley added, his voice rough. "If we catch Malfoy, we can do some sentencing of our own tonight..."

Their voices died down, and with a muttered word, Zabini lit his wand. The light was feeble and pale, and with blood dribbling down Nott's face, it made him look quite disgusting.

"And now what do we do?" Zabini asked scathingly after a long few seconds of silence.

"The Dark Lord gave me a mission," Nott replied, his face twisted into a scowl. His mouth was lined with blood, and from the way he licked

his lips, Malfoy suspected the sick bastard liked the feeling. "And now I've got a target."

"Weasley," Malfoy said immediately.

"I already hit a Gryffindor, that's not how this works!" Nott spat. "I already told you this, there's a cycle to these things to gather the appropriate energy, and I can't hit the same house twice in a row! I was thinking of hitting one of the Slytherins, as a matter of fact – one of the more disposable ones, like Davis or Bulstrode."

"And I already told you that's not going to happen!" Malfoy snarled. "You're not attacking our House!"

"It's the perfect alibi for you and I, and they're disposable!"

"Nevertheless," Zabini interjected icily, "wanton violence would prove useless here, as that pompous bastard would have no qualms exposing us anyways."

"And you have a better idea?" Nott snapped.

"Hit Macmillian," Zabini said coldly, "and hit him so hard that no one dares to even consider the thought of publicly exposing us. And I know you've got something in mind for something like that."

"Going to Hufflepuff next will break the cycle –"

"And Dumbledore will break us in half if he finds out what we've done," Malfoy cut him off. "To say nothing of the Dark Lord."

"Find the synergies you need to get the power you require, I don't bloody care," Zabini said, his eyes glittering in the blackness. "But Macmillian needs to be removed from the picture – tonight."

There was silence for a long few seconds, and then –

"I think I might have just the thing."

Barnabus Cuffe, editor of the Daily Prophet, did not consider himself to be a humble man. After all, that would imply there was someone that he should be subservient towards or showing respect. He was more of a man than that.

So he eyed the door of the interrogation room with supreme self-confidence. After all, in moments, his highly-paid and exceptionally professional lawyer would be here, the entire issue would be brushed aside, and the Ministry would pay a high tithe to his vault in reparations for taking him against his will. That was just a fact, after all – the Ministry wouldn't dare harm their most important communication medium –

The door cracked open, and a hooded man walked in, a heavy woolen cowl thrown over his face. Cuffe couldn't fathom the reason why a man would wear such a garment in such a bloody stifling cell (the enchanted glass, claustrophobic stone walls, shoddy lighting, and lack of windows did nothing for the air circulation).

He took in a deep sniff and immediately regretted it – the room reeked of sweat and urine – but he glared balefully at the figure, who was clearly not his lawyer.

"Well?" Cuffe demanded after a few seconds of silence. "If you're not going to give me a glass of water, then get the hell out. I have nothing to say to you."

"Oh, you do."

Cuffe's eyebrows shot straight into his neatly brushed hair, even as his mind raced to put a face to the voice. "Excuse me?"

"We're not going to play legal games here, but if we were, I'd call this 'Interrogation'," the hooded man growled, his voice raspy. "I ask questions, you give me answers, and if I don't like the answers I get, I keep asking questions and things will get messy in here. I don't have a problem with that, but I bet you do."

Cuffe's eyes narrowed. He still didn't recognize the voice, but that hardly bothered him now – if the man meant anything or had done the slightest thing worthwhile, he would be worthy of recognition.

"I'm not telling you anything," Cuffe spat imperiously. "I have my rights and under the law, you can't question me –"

The hooded man's wand snapped up and pointed at the window. A second later, he waved his wand...

And dispelled the illusion revealing only a grey brick wall where the window used to be.

Cuffe's heart started to race. He was trapped in the room, and nobody would be able to see anything –

"You've got information I want," the hooded man hissed, tearing away his cowl with a gloved hand. His fingers gripped the hem of his hood. "And I'm really good at getting this part."

The hood was thrown back, and Barnabus Cuffe swallowed back vomit at the sight of the man.

Patchy orange hair covered a mercilessly burnt head, with crude stitching holding the pieces of his scalp together. The man had never been attractive, but the horrifying burns across his face, somehow sparing the charred eyebrows, made him grotesque. A trickle of blood dribbled down the edge of the man's temples, where Cuffe could see hints of a wound still open.

But he recognized the man – for Merlin's sake, he recognized the monster – and the burning rage set in every charred crevasse of the man's face seemed to darken the entire room

He couldn't help himself, and a few moments later, he understood exactly why the room reeked of urine.

"So here's how this goes," Dmitri Kemester hissed. "First question: why the hell were you –" he shouted the word, and Cuffe shrank back

– "brought in here? Crimes of violation of contract and extortion, eh? Where's the multiple counts of bribery and perjury, I might ask?"

"I... I have never perjured –"

He didn't get another word off, because Kemester had just punched him across the face. The hit made him reel, but a second later, there was a curious dull ache instead of the throbbing pain...

"You answer the questions I ask without protest," Kemester said coldly as he lowered his wand, "and though that little hit I gave you won't leave a mark, enough of those and it'll feel like your face is on fire – unless, of course, I start breaking fingers."

"No, no, please –"

"Then answer the fucking question!" Kemester roared, backhanding Cuffe again, only to remove the visible mark a second later. "Why were you brought in here, of all people?"

"I don't know –"

There was an audible crunch, and Cuffe nearly toppled off his seat, blood streaming freely from his broken nose.

"Episkey. Tergeo. Now answer the fucking question," Kemester growled, lowering his wand as Cuffe struggled to string a word together.

"I was arrested for b-blackmailing Dumbledore to get the article he wanted, and then p-printing my own in its place. O-Of course, he never paid me –"

"It's the principle behind the matter, you cowardly bit of filth, and I really don't give a damn why he didn't pay you," Kemester spat. "What article did he want?"

"S-Something about Potter – Dumbledore said they wanted to bring out some s-story about how Y-You-Know-Who is back –"

Kemester's ruined lips twisted into an ugly smile, revealing, much to Cuffe's horror, disturbingly white teeth. "But you couldn't allow that, could you? Who paid you off?"

Cuffe blanched. "The money came from three different accounts –"

"Then I want account numbers!" Kemester roared, slamming both his fists on the table. Ripping a sheet of paper from the pad at the corner of the desk, he shoved a quill and ink to the cowering editor. "Write them – now."

Cuffe started scribbling madly, but Kemester continued moving, pacing slowly around the table, until he was standing directly behind Cuffe.

"I want names."

Cuffe continued writing for a few more seconds, splattering ink all over the table. He noticed, for a brief moment, that the inkwell was old and cracked around the top – something wasn't quite right –

"Stop writing." Kemester's voice came from directly behind him, out of his peripheral vision, but Cuffe didn't dare turn around.

"Now, I want you to be very honest with me," Kemester began softly. "Did you ever meet with these people?"

"N-No."

"Did you ever try to meet with these people?"

"No."

"Have you ever met any of these people in a context outside of this case?"

Cuffe shook for a few seconds, until in a very small voice, he said, "Yes."

The next few seconds were a blur. Before Cuffe could even scream, his hand exploded with pain – worse pain than he had ever experienced in his life. His eyes rolled back as he let out a howl, blood and ink mixing together as his right hand lay shaking on the table – he couldn't look at it, he didn't want to see the remnants of the shattered inkwell buried in his flesh...

"Like that, huh?" Kemester snarled. "Do you like that?"

"NO!"

"THEN DON'T LIE TO ME!" Kemester roared, slamming the base of his hand down hard on Cuffe's, driving the glass deeper and deeper –

And suddenly, it stopped. The blood was gone. The pain was strangely muted – again. But as Cuffe looked around the desk, still soaked in ink, he wondered where the glass was –

Kemester only smiled his horrifying bright smile as Cuffe screamed and screamed as he realized where the glass had all ended up – inside his hand...

"I knew for a fact you met Felix Nott," Kemester said smoothly, stepping around the table to face Cuffe, who was now crying openly and trying desperately not to move his hand. "It was on the front page of the paper three months ago. He's also," he added, all trace of a smile vanishing, "a former Death Eater. Want to explain that?"

"He left... he left the D-Death Eaters years ago!" Cuffe cried. "God, K-Kemester, p-please get the glass out –"

"No," Kemester said coolly, continuing to pace. "But you know what I think? I think there's a reason he paid you off. I think he paid you off so that no news would be leaked surrounding a few strange little events, so disappearances go unreported... and anything that supports Dumbledore gets vetoed. That's why Skeeter's article vanished – because you didn't want to admit that something might be happening."

"Y-You-Know-Who c-can't be back –"

"We don't know that," Kemester growled viciously, leaning forward, his horrifying face inches from the sobbing reporter. "But I'll have everything I need soon enough, and the funny thing was, you should have seen it coming."

"I d-don't know –"

"You see, Barnabus," Kemester hissed through his pearlescent teeth, "I know you've been following the business section like any other rich fuck would. You would have noticed the wavering support for goblin banking after the break-in this summer, and the rising discontent of several very rich wizard bankers and lawyers both inside and outside of Gringotts. So when you would have heard that they were looking for the easiest possible way to break free of the clutches of those little rat-bastards, you would have been all over it."

"Of course, it wouldn't be so easy for you, considering you couldn't reveal your hand openly given your position. And given that those bankers and lawyers needed an opening in Ministry law to pull off their little scheme – found, by the way, by yours truly – you knew you had to be on their side if you wanted any sort of executive clearances." Kemester smiled again, his eyes lighting up with sudden recognition, and Cuffe could feel another warm trickle down the inside of his leg. "But they wouldn't let you in, would they? You're a little climber, not old money... no, you had to cut a deal."

"I d-don't know what you're –"

"So you bargained with that old money to get a share of the massive profits that they're sure to reap when all the fools come rushing to invest in the 'newest wizarding institution'," Kemester finished, a disgusted look sliding onto his ruined face. "A pity so many of them are Death Eaters."

"T-Then aren't we –"

"On the same side?" Kemester asked distractedly, prodding Cuffe's right hand lightly. Even as the fat man howled, the Hit Wizard continued to speak, almost to the gently swaying lamp hanging from

the ceiling. "Not particularly. I have only interest in one thing and one thing only, and they have the capacity to do it for a minimal charge. But I also have no interest in having a mob of angry goblins and the possibility of them unleashing their dragons from inside Gringotts into Diagon Alley. And they'd do it, too – they've been quiet for too long."

Kemester looked down at Cuffe, who was gasping and choking for air against his wracking sobs of pain. "So, what possessed you to be so stupid to try and double cross the goblins?"

"The M-Ministry needs financial security – GOD, MAKE IT STOP! MY-"

"And you believed it too," Kemester growled very slowly, pulling his finger away from Cuffe's finger. "You stupid little man. You ought to go to Azkaban just to cure you of your idiocy."

Very real fear surged through Cuffe, enough to drive away the pain even for a second. "N-No, please don't send me there, I'll give you everything, don't send me to the Dementors –"

"I'm sure you will," Kemester growled. "Oh I'm sure you will..."

"That's enough of that."

Both Cuffe and Kemester started – neither of them had heard nor seen the door open – and Kemester's hood was pulled up in a second. Cuffe struggled to focus his eyes on the figures through the haze of pain. They were both beautiful and blonde, dressed primly in very dark robes... but for some reason, Cuffe couldn't recall seeing them before...

"You don't need to disguise yourself here, Kemester, we know who you are," the first woman said. Her hair was cut very short around her ears in an attractive style, but there was nothing soft about her appearance. If anything, her eyes were brutally cold.

"Who the hell are you?" Kemester asked bluntly. "And I want to see your clearance – now."

"We're prosecuting attorneys, from the legal consulting firm hired to pursue the case against Mr. Cuffe over there," the second woman said in a clipped tone. Her hair was considerably longer and tied back tightly, but just untidily enough to look stylish at the same time. But while her companion's features were hard, this woman's face was softer, although there seemed to be something about her eyes that he didn't quite understand –

"What firm?" Kemester asked suspiciously. "And why wasn't I called?"

"The firm is Desdame & Vuneren," the first woman said primly. "I'm Miss Vuneren, and this is Miss Desdame. And regarding your call, I believe one Reed Larshall has been frantically trying to reach you for the past hour."

"We passed him on the way in," Desdame said softly.

Kemester still looked suspicious. "Where have I heard the name Desdame before..."

Desdame gave Kemester a cold smile and extended a business card. "If you're ever in the need of some... persuasive consultants, don't hesitate to contact the firm. Our rates are quite reasonable."

"I'm sure they are," Kemester growled. "Fortunately, you shouldn't have any difficulty getting anything out of him."

Vuneren raised a well-manicured eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Give him a good handshake," Kemester said with a hint of a cruel grin. "You can see what happens. Although you wouldn't want to be too rough – if he's released, he's got a big report for tomorrow, and I know the Minister wouldn't want it to be subpar."

Desdame's eyes went stony. "What are you talking about, Hit Wizard?"

The smile vanished from Kemester's face, and he suddenly looked extremely grim, as though he was concealing the true extent of his frustration and rage. "Fudge has decided that he wants to make his public declarations tomorrow to the wizarding world. It passed preliminary Wizengamot screening last night, so that was enough for him and decided to move up the schedule."

"What, exactly, is he planning to announce?" Vuneren asked, her eyes narrowed to near slits.

"The new wizard bank, and of the full extent of Dumbledore's treason," Kemester growled darkly, appearing to enjoy the brief looks of shock that the two lawyers exchanged. "Tomorrow, the war begins."

Author's Notes - it seems complicated, and believe me, it is. But every thread is connected in the web, and resolution will be found, don't worry. And keep in mind that characters will speculate wildly - they're working with the information they have, not always the whole truth. And as always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

"Dmitri! For Merlin's sake, where the hell have you –"

"Shut up, Larshall."

Larshall's mouth snapped shut for a few seconds before falling open as Kemester reached one of the massive metal filing cabinets along the side of the room and tore it open. The cabinet bearings squealed horribly as Kemester pulled out file after file, dropping most on the floor as he muttered inaudibly under his breath.

"Kemester, what the – Kemester, you can't go in there!"

"What's stopping me?" Kemester snapped, ripping another cabinet open with a blunt slash of his wand, shattering the lock entirely.

"Those are sealed case files!" Larshall replied, his eyes shooting back and forth across the room as his face flushed with panic. He drew his wand hastily. "Dmitri, I really don't want to do this –"

He didn't get another word out of his mouth, because Kemester had just dropped a stack of a dozen thick black files on a nearby table and was rifling through them furiously. It was like he was consumed by something...

"Kemester, put those back, for fuck's sake!"

"Would you relax?" Kemester hissed, looking up and glaring at his former partner. "We've got a leak in the department here, and I wanted to verify it."

Some blood left Larshall's face, but not enough of it. "Are you implying that –"

"I'm not implying, I'm telling you that something's missing!" Kemester snarled, pointing down with a horribly deformed finger. "Right here there was an evidence bag with a tiny scrap of paper – fuck, you would know that, Reed, you were there when I was reviewing this file over a month ago! A little scrap of paper I duplicated, from the original Auror case file – and now it's gone. Someone's already been through this –"

"Kemester, you're jumping at shadows," Larshall said quickly, trying to keep a rational tone in his voice as he looked hastily around the room. Fortunately for the both of them, the dimly-lit Hit Wizard office was nearly empty – most of the officers were either on patrol or had already gone home for some desperately needed rest. "Where the hell were you, any –"

"Cuffe got brought in," Kemester growled savagely. "I needed a word with him."

The colour drained from Larshall's face as his panic returned. "Kemester, you can't do this, Umbridge is going to kill you –"

"I don't need the fucking toad this time to find out the truth –"

"What truth?" Larshall exclaimed, fury and frustration finally leaking into his voice. "Kemester, you're going to lose everything – again – and this time there are higher stakes than ever. Do you think your brother would have wanted to see you become like this? Do you think Bartholomew can rest easy, knowing what you've become –"

Larshall didn't get another word out as the air was blasted out of his lungs. He realized a second later that his back was screaming with pain and that there was a wand an inch away from his eye – Kemester's wand.

"You mention my brother one more time," Kemester said, his voice deadly quiet. "And I swear to whatever you hold dear, I'll kill you. I'll do it right here. And you know that I wouldn't care who sees."

"Kemester..."

"The only reason I'm not killing you now is because we need every Hit Wizard and Merlin-forsaken Auror possible right now on mass-alert, and like it or not, you're one of them. Now when I lower my wand, you're going to run and find that fucker Shackbolt. Get him to round up every Auror he can find and bring them back here. Then go and get the Hit Wizards."

"Dmitri, what –"

"And don't you tell a soul why you're doing this!" Kemester snarled, jabbing his wand painfully into Larshall's temple. "The last thing we need is another leak to people we can't trust, especially considering what's at stake. Merlin, we've been so fucking stupid –"

"What are you talking about?" Larshall asked, confusion filling his voice as Kemester withdrew his wand and went back to the pile of files. Stacking them untidily, he sent them flying back into the cabinets with a wave of his wand.

"We've been betrayed," Kemester growled, slamming the cabinets shut and magically repairing the broken lock. "Cuffe gets brought in on charges that make hardly any sense – no person in their right mind would issue a warrant like that right now, we need the Prophet more than ever. But then I realize that with Cuffe out of the way, the Prophet likely will delay print until evening – after Fudge's speech. Cuffe's one of Fudge's greatest allies, one who'd be able to tip him off if something might be going wrong and one that the Minister would listen to, but now he's in custody. Furthermore, it's too late for any judge to see him right now – just the way it was planned. You follow that?"

"I don't see how that's –"

"Reed, listen!" Kemester growled with frustration, fixing Larshall with a horrifyingly intense stare. "Cuffe gets locked up, even though he has ties to the new wizarding bank and the Ministry, ties that would normally get him out faster than damn near anyone. And yet the first lawyers on the scene are from the fucking prosecution – someone set this up!"

"You think someone wanted Cuffe out of the way," Larshall said slowly, his mind racing.

"Worse," Kemester said, yanking out a piece of parchment and scribbling frantically. "He's a scapegoat. He's on the bottom, he's useless to whoever's manipulating this right now, but they're gunning for something higher – political power. And since Fudge finally got that bit of legislation he needs through the Wizengamot this afternoon and is more powerful than ever, they don't need Cuffe anymore to sway the public into prodding those old warlocks onto our side. So he becomes fodder for when the goblins bomb Diagon Alley –"

"What?"

" – The goblins aren't going to take this affront lightly, Larshall! There will be blood, and during the confusion, I'm sure Fudge'll get himself 'accidentally' killed by a 'misfired curse'," Kemester finished, tossing a handful of drying sand on the parchment and rolling it up tightly. "He gets replaced by an insider who's got connections to the two groups who we don't dare let rule this country: the new bank, and Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore wouldn't assassinate anyone –"

"Bullshit," Kemester snarled. "Forgetting Laertes Rawling so quickly? Just because Fudge might have been convinced doesn't mean I believe it. And considering that I've got connections to the new bank, I wouldn't be surprised at all if they were trying it and hanging me out to dry! Hell, they'll probably implicate me in Fudge's murder!"

"But why kill Fudge?" Larshall exclaimed. "From the way you're telling it, he's doing everything the new bank executives want!"

"So it seems – unless he asked for control they won't give up, or to placate the goblins in some way, which they won't do." Kemester muttered. "More likely it's Dumbledore, setting up one of his pawns in the Ministry to take over –"

"So let me get this straight," Larshall interrupted, raising his hands and narrowing his eyes. "You're suggesting that Cuffe's effectively

baseless arrest was due to a massive conspiracy by either the new bank executives trying to seize Ministerial power or by Dumbledore seeking to make a play for power through his people in the Ministry. Furthermore, you're suggesting that the goblins are going to bomb Diagon Alley – something that Cuffe could have tipped Fudge off against, were he free –"

"Cuffe usually has eyes and ears everywhere," Kemester said curtly, "and it doesn't help that bitch Skeeter is everywhere she doesn't need to be. If the goblins were going to attack, he'd know and Fudge would be out of danger in minutes. We need to get him into protective custody before the goblins or an assassin kills him, and that means we'll need serious muscle to get past the brainless morons that'll be between us and him."

"Umbridge," Larshall murmured, finally beginning to understand. "And the international journalists? Fudge wants them all there –"

"And that's the reason we need more manpower, to get them out," Kemester said tersely, "if only to avoid another embarrassing international incident on our hands. This could stand to be worse than the Quidditch World Cup if everything goes wrong."

Larshall put a hand to his head as he tried to put the whirling puzzle pieces together. "All we need now is for Harry Potter to be involved and this would be typical of your insane theories –"

Kemester snorted. "Reed, if he's not involved in some way, I'll eat my boots. He's just one of the three pieces I haven't figured out –"

"Well, you'd better do it fast," Larshall said hurriedly, checking his watch. "Fudge's speech is at nine and it's past two already – oh, damn, I forgot to tell you! He's going to pissed..."

"Who, Scrimgeour?" Kemester asked distractedly, hastily tying a note to an owl's leg. "I hate the bastard, but if you find him, get him and Bones too, we'll need all the firepower we can get if the goblins decide to get physically involved –"

"Lucius Malfoy is in your office. He's been waiting for you."

His hand slipped for a second, and the owl hooted indignantly, but Kemester didn't care. His eyes narrowed into slits of sudden realization.

The second puzzle piece was in his grasp.

"Well, that was easy," Tonks muttered, trying to slow her breathing as she closed the bathroom door and twisted the lock shut. Her hair had gone a sullen navy, and she was frowning as she shoved a heavy trash can under the handle. "Too easy. Way too easy"

"We got what we wanted," Harry said quietly, untying his golden blonde hair and tossing it back as he looked in the mirror. But despite his tone, the edgy feeling in the pit of his stomach was far more telling. Cuffe had given up quickly, and it had taken them less than ten minutes to convince him to follow all their demands. "He's going to have the full statement printed as soon as Scrimgeour drops the charges."

"You are taking to this girl thing way too easily," Tonks muttered as she stepped towards one of the many unused toilets. This part of the Ministry was dingy and seldom visited by anyone, and many of the toilets hadn't been cleaned in a while – thus making one of them a perfect spot to hide a bag covered by Harry's Invisibility Cloak. "But we can't afford to waste any more time – if Fudge is making his statement tomorrow morning –"

The edginess was threatening to blossom into full-fledged panic, but Harry only let his expression harden slightly. At this point, he couldn't afford to lose his calm – not now, while everything was spinning out of control...

"We can handle this," he said slowly, fighting to keep the quaver out of his feminine voice – which was a lot harder than he thought. "We just need to find the international reporters and give them the truth, like Dumbledore said before. That'll ruin Fudge's chances for a successful press conference if they're attacking his credibility. Is there any way we can get to them?"

Tonks drew her wand. "Inquisito itineris," she muttered, with a tight circular wave of her wand, and before Harry's astounded eyes, what appeared to be a hazy, three-dimensional golden image of the entire Ministry materialized. Some parts glowed bright yellow, while other sections took on a sodden vomit-like shade.

"Where did you learn that spell?"

"Auror training course in basic utility spells. A lot bloody harder than you'd think," Tonks replied tensely, scanning the cross-sectional map carefully. "And since I'm not nearly good enough to imprint the image into our minds, we're going to have to go with this. And this isn't even very good – most of Experimental Charms and the Department of Mysteries is simply too magical to be mapped properly. Hell, this close to the Department of Mysteries, I'm surprised this spell worked at all."

"Where are we now?" Harry asked, already planning on asking Tonks how the spell worked when he had more time.

"Here, just off of the interrogation rooms" Tonks whispered, tapping the spot on the map with her wand. It gleamed like a single miniature turquoise star, floating in the middle of the map. "We need to get here." She pointed at another spot on the map, six stories up. Where her wand touched, another miniature star ignited, this time a brilliant red. "That's where the Department of International Magical Cooperation is, on Level Five – and it's also where the foreign journalists are being kept. "And to get up there, we need to pass at least three security checkpoints: once leaving this level; once passing the Department of Magical Law Enforcement on Level Two; and once before we actually get into the area where the reporters are sequestered."

Harry let out a frustrated groan. "Tell me there's a way around."

"This late at night?" Tonks asked incredulously. "I'm amazed we only got stopped three times on the way down here. Fudge has blocked Apparition into, out of, and around the Ministry, he thinks Dumbledore could use it to wreak havoc in here – and technically, he's right. And I've already told you, we won't get clearance to get to the journalists,

and that's presuming we can find and blackmail Scrimgeour to get us that close."

Harry took a deep breath. "What about Cassane?"

"What about him?"

"He's the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards! They can't exactly stop him – or any guests he brings."

Tonks paused. "It's... it could work, presuming you can get a hold of him. He won't listen to your lawyer this late at night, but he might listen to you. But you'll have to go in person, and by Portkey."

"Why can't you use the Patronus Charm –"

"Because we don't have time to run from my colleagues who would chase us down the second they see a foreign Patronus running down the hall," Tonks retorted, wordlessly summoning a roll of toilet paper to her hands. "Portus."

"So we'll talk to Cassane –"

"Wrong, you'll talk to Cassane," Tonks interrupted. "I need to get Dumbledore, the rest of the Order –"

"Take the twins too, if you can," Harry added. At Tonks' incredulous expression, he shrugged and tossed his blonde hair back again, showing his ample chest with a sly smile. "You never know what they could bring to this."

"And normally I'm the one using my assets to get what I want," Tonks muttered. "This is so weird... not to mention unfair. And you got used to this too quickly, in my opinion."

Harry shrugged, even as the shocking realization of the truth in Tonks' words rang in his mind. She was right, he had gotten used to it too easily – especially after he had reached his second simulacrum. Maybe that ritual had more effects than I feared...

"We need to get anything and everything out of Cassane," Tonks said sharply, cutting through the thoughts racing through Harry's mind. "Especially anything about that new 'wizard' bank. I know there's something bad about that – namely the fact that I'm only just hearing about it now, and this sort of thing would require weeks of work to figure out. What game is Fudge playing at with it..."

"We'll talk more about it later," Harry said bracingly. "You managed to get my second simulacrum in position?"

Tonks snorted. "Wasn't as easy as you made it out to be, but yes, I did. Damn good thing I'm one of the best at Disguise and Concealment."

"I'm amazed you had time –"

Tonks winked at him. "I'm good at what I do, princess."

"Hey, I'm not a princess –"

Tonks placed the toilet paper roll in Harry's hands, and without warning, pulled him into a deep passionate kiss. Harry's eyes widened slightly as the image of two beautiful women kissing heavily appeared in the dirty bathroom mirror – and as he felt something flutter in a very different part of his body...

He barely even noticed the jerk behind his navel...

"You shouldn't be here."

"Somebody has to be," Lucius Malfoy said smoothly, turning up from where a tiny book was opened on Kemester battered desk. The man's face was surprisingly open, but Kemester knew that it was a farce.

"After all," Lucius continued smoothly, "somebody has to be here to inform you of our triumph."

Kemester didn't say a word, but his left foot rose – and kicked backwards, to slam the door in Larshall's shocked face.

"Everything?" he asked quietly. "You got it all?"

"It was more a matter of paperwork than anything," Lucius said with a hint of a shrug as he began to move towards the small darkened window in Kemester's dilapidated office. "And it's all thanks to you, Dmitri. You gave us everything we needed."

"I found the law –"

"Dmitri, it was the spirit behind that law that you brought to the table," Lucius corrected, his eyes gleaming with raw pleasure as his hand brushed along the window sill. "It... inspired us."

"Where did you transfer the money?" Kemester asked suddenly, his hand sliding towards his pocket. "And how did you get it?"

Lucius paused, but his small, smug grin never faltered. "There was a bit of a scuffle, but it wasn't an issue that couldn't be dealt with. As for the money... well, new banking institutions require a great deal of capital."

"And it's all legal?" Kemester pursued, his eyes narrowing. "All of it?"

"Sealed in blood," Lucius replied cryptically, "another thing I feel indebted for, because without his little victory in the court room against your case, we never would have had his signature for all the documents – or his blood."

Kemester's wand was out and pointed at Lucius in a blur. "I'm sure it is, Malfoy – and you'd do well never to mention that case in this room again."

Lucius respectfully bowed his head, but his insufferable smirk never wavered. "Duly noted, but I assume you have another question that we should address?"

"Good assumption," Kemester growled, taking another step closer. Lucius, for his credit, did not back down an inch. "The bank... I'm assuming there were issues with the goblins –"

"A reasonable assumption," Lucius replied quickly – too quickly.

"There were issues, weren't there?"

"Let's be reasonable here –"

Kemester slammed his fist on the desk as he began walking around the desk. "Lucius, you told me the transition would be smooth, that this wouldn't happen!"

"The goblins were... reticent about the transfers," Lucius said tightly, his voice going abruptly cold. "Suffice to say, we didn't have enough paperwork to satisfy all of their accountants, so –"

"So you pissed off the one group we didn't dare target or attack in any way?" Kemester snarled. He could feel a trickle of blood flowing across his cheek, barely visible on his lacerated face, but he didn't care – it always seemed to happen when he got angry these days. "The one group that I spent months trying to find a way to placate! How many died?"

"Kemester, I –"

"HOW MANY?"

Lucius nearly started at the raw bellow, but his eyes only hardened further. "Eleven."

Most of the air rushed out of Kemester's lungs, and it took an enormous effort for him not to throttle the conceited imbecile standing a few meters away from him. "Eleven. You killed eleven of them. Are you... are you fucking insane, Malfoy? Do you know what's going to happen?"

"The Goblin Liaison Office will –"

"Be absolutely useless, like it's always been, because you killed eleven of their bankers so you could move a massive amount of capital to a bank set in direct competition to theirs," Kemester said

softly. He could see it playing out in his mind – the retaliation, the attacks, the panic, the disaster that hadn't been seen for decades – and it was all the fault of Lucius Malfoy. "You're such a fool."

"Listen, Kemester," Lucius said curtly, "the goblins that died – it was accidental, and no court in this country could convict us of this. And besides, this was all perfectly legal under the law –"

"Stop talking," Kemester muttered, turning away from Malfoy to stare at the empty and guttered fireplace. "And get out."

"What are you going to –"

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do, I'm going to call Scrimgeour and Bones and tell them to seal off Diagon Alley before the goblins retaliate and kill as many wizards as they possibly can," Kemester replied grimly. "And if you don't get the fuck out of my office, I'll just hand you straight to the goblins myself as the instigator – they'll get their blood, and nobody will have to..."

His voice trailed off, and his hand suddenly tightened over his wand. In a frightening second, he knew. I knew something wasn't quite right.

He bent over slightly, next to the grate in the fireplace, and touched the ashes lightly at the bottom of the grate. The ash smeared on his blackened fingers, but even he could see that the ashes were iron grey – and glistened with their own light in the dimly-lit room.

"Lucius," he asked slowly, rising to his feet, "did you use my fireplace?"

The former Death Eater's wand was blindingly fast, but Kemester's wand was already drawn. There was a bang that sounded like a gunshot, and Lucius crumpled against the wall, unconscious with a trickle of blood dribbling down the side of his scalp.

"You son of a bitch," Kemester swore, the pieces starting to fall into place. "You Death-Eating fuck. Someone tipped you off I was coming, you knew exactly what to say to delay me, distract me – you wanted me out of the way so..."

And then the last piece clicked into the puzzle. It didn't make sense – hell, nothing about the past few hours made the slightest damned bit of sense – but he saw the connection in a single, horrifyingly clear instant.

"Nymphadora Vuneren... Nymphadora... Nymphadora Tonks," he said slowly, wild recognition filling his eyes as he began moving towards his door in long, quickening strides. "They got to the Aurors... and she was there since the beginning... oh sweet Merlin's fuck –"

"Expelliarmus!"

He didn't even see the spell coming, and his wand was torn from his hand as he stepped out into the hallway – into an ambush.

He dove for another office, but the next spell hit him in mid-step, and despite the near-constant flow of painkillers through his veins, he still howled with pain as the curse erupted across his insides...

"Hem hem..."

He tried to blink past the pain, but he couldn't stop this. He tried to block it out, utilizing every scrap of training he knew, but it wasn't working – by Merlin, it wasn't fucking working!

But despite the haze filling his eyes, he could still see her walking closer and closer, her brilliant magenta robes a greasy blob in his sight, her toad-like face contorted into a disappointed smile.

"And to think you were doing so well, too," Dolores Umbridge said disapprovingly, clumsily waving her wand and yanking Kemester to his feet – where two hooded men put wands to his throat. "But I brought you back for a reason, Dmitri, and this... dear me, this is not it. I can't have you disrupting the Minister's conference for your wild, unbalanced speculations –"

She doesn't know! Kemester thought suddenly, the thought cutting like a hot knife through the sluggish morass of his pain. She doesn't

know Malfoy bungled this – there still might be a chance to save Fudge's life, she's devoted enough to him, but why can't I say it –

"So I think that it would best for you to return to rehabilitation," Umbridge finished with a sad nod. "I'm not going to have you interrupt the Minister's speech, the one that will seal his place in history. Off to the ward with you."

The hooded men took a firm hold of Kemester's arms, and even as he thrashed, he could see the man lurking behind Umbridge, a disgustingly triumphant smile on his smug, swarthy face. And I shouldn't even be surprised that the slime betrayed me...

"I'll kill you, Sanders," Kemester slurred, rage allowing him to shove words through the curse that roiled through his gut. "I'll fucking kill you, you traitor! I'll –"

He felt a gloved fist slam into his raw temple, and everything went black.

Leon Sanders smiled and leaned against the wall as they dragged an unconscious Kemester down the darkened hallway, unable to keep the sneer away from his face. It was about time the bastard got brought in. And best of all, he had only needed to inform Umbridge of the situation, not even lifting a finger. It was glorious.

"So what now, Madam?"

Umbridge closed Kemester's office door with a wave of her wand and he heard the click of a lock. "We muster the Aurors and Hit Wizards, and direct them to Hogsmeade," she said crisply. "We attack the instant Fudge concludes his speech, just as planned. Dumbledore won't know what hit him. He'll fall," she said, her eyes lighting up as she tucked away her wand, "and Hogwarts will be mine."

His feet hammered on the rough cobblestones of the narrow path as he ran, his cloak flapping and his wand pulled free, ready for an attack at any second. Even though he had walked the path before, it seemed different now – every tree seemed larger, stretching out over the path, branches like arthritic, clutching fingers...

Stop it, Harry thought to himself as he picked up his pace. The night's playing tricks on me, and it doesn't help that the few lamps Cassane set up are casting shadows all over the place. You'd think a wizard like him would have more lights or something... but then again, he does like his privacy...

The house came into view, and he breathed easier as he slowed his pace. There was a light in one of the windows, but he wasn't surprised about that – Cassane seemed to be the type of man to work late on a magical project –

He froze in mid-step. He was close enough to see through the massive arched window into the sitting room now – and he could see more shadows, silhouetted in the room. Cassane's shape was recognizable, but there was another, shorter and standing opposite the man, as if they were arguing about something...

Harry's breath nearly hitched in his chest as he looked closer. It didn't make the slightest iota of sense – why the hell was she, of all people, meeting with Nathan Cassane –

It was only a few steps to the massive oaken door. Harry reached to slam the brass knocker against the wood –

"You might want to put your wand away, Harry," Cassane said wryly, as he pulled the door wide, the warm air flowing out of the house in a wave filled with wood smoke and something much more subtly rich that Harry didn't quite recognize entirely. "You should know that panic has no place in this house. Lord Voldemort can't even penetrate my walls."

Harry scowled as he shoved his wand into his pocket, stepping past Cassane and looking towards the sitting room. "Yeah, Voldemort might not be able to get in, but you just happen to let French quarter-Veela Beauxbatons graduates penetrate?"

Cassane began to speak, but Harry wasn't listening – his eyes were fixing on Fleur Delacour. The blonde girl was not wearing the crisp, business robes of a Ministry worker, but instead a scandalously-cut

black dress that seemed inches shy of being indecent, complete with daring heels and a panicked expression.

"Harry, I swear, I can explain –"

"Well, it had better be a short explanation, because I'm very short on time and patience right now," Harry growled, stepping behind one of the armchairs and nearly tripping on a pile of battered and dog-eared books as Cassane entered the room, a stern expression on his face. "I've got a lot on my mind, and the last thing I need is you involved with... involved with –"

"Harry!"

Cassane cut off Fleur's protestations in mid-word as he raised a hand. "Rest assured, Harry, this is not what it appears. She is here seeking asylum – thanks to your plan, I might add."

Harry's gaze snapped back to Cassane, who was already moving back to his leather armchair by the fire. A small tumbler of whiskey was setting on the side table, but Harry ignored it as his eyes narrowed.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why don't the two of you sit down on the couch?" Cassane said, his voice light as he gestured towards the large leather sofa in the room. In an instant, the pile of books and mingled Muggle electrical equipment sitting there rose into the air and zoomed out the door with a rustle of papers and crackling of electricity.

Fleur sat down immediately, nervously toying with the fastening on her purse where Harry guessed was her wand. Harry held back his frown, trying to remain expressionless as he stepped around the chair and slowly sat down next to her, his every motion filled with suspicion. It was a bit of a tight fit – and Fleur's outfit made it all the more difficult – but Harry's eyes didn't leave Cassane.

"You owe me an explanation, if you aren't going to help me."

"I owe you precisely nothing, Harry," Cassane retorted, picking up his glass. "Frankly, it's in the best interests of us both that we act upon recent events – and that you are aware of the consequences of your actions. I could have only dreamed of such knowledge when I was your age – not like I would have ever gone to look for it."

"So you're saying you already know about what Fudge is announcing?" Harry asked incredulously. "And you didn't tell me that he was going to announce this? The creation of a new bank and a declaration of war? You didn't think I might want to –"

"Fudge told me himself tonight," Cassane replied crisply, folding his arms. "He wanted me to stand beside him while he makes the announcement. And then Miss Delacour's arrival but an hour ago only confirmed the matter – many forces are on the move, and not just the Ministry."

"Harry, I swear, I would have told you as soon as I could, but I needed to find a place to hide," Fleur interjected quickly, her eyes pleading as they met Harry's stony expression. "It was... merde, I don't even know how to describe it! The paperwork just started changing – it was magic, I'm sure of it – and then the Senior Undersecretary came in and told us that the Ministry was going to be doing 'reconstruction'."

"So you ran?"

"Harry, they thought I was a goblin sympathizer!" Fleur exclaimed, her cheeks going pink. "I... I mean, I worked at Gringotts, I'm a foreigner in the country – the perfect bouc émissaire for the Ministry?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Scapegoat," Cassane muttered darkly.

"So I packed all my things and... and I came here," Fleur finished in a rush, her eyes darting between Cassane and Harry. "I didn't know where else to go – it would be too dangerous to go to the Muggle embassy with my paperwork, and it wasn't like I could go to the Ministry –"

"But why would you come here?"

"I... I didn't know where else –"

"And you let her in?" Harry asked incredulously, turning to Cassane.

The older man only shrugged and winked at Harry. "What can I say? I may have a bit of a weakness for French girls." Cassane shot Harry another wink, but Harry noticed that the lightness of tone didn't extend to the man's eyes. He just lied to my face – but what would be his motivation for keeping Fleur around...

"So the Ministry's backing this new bank over Gringotts?" Harry asked after a few seconds of thought, deciding to come back to Fleur later with Cassane privately.

"It's been long in coming," Cassane said quietly. "Many of the administrators and Wizengamot officials don't like the fact that goblins have a monopoly on wizarding commercial banking – not to mention an enormous amount of stored capital that they can use as leverage. It was only a matter of time."

"And when Fudge passed his new laws today, allowing the breaking of the monopole, dozens of wizarding accounts were emptied forcibly to be transferred to the new bank," Fleur whispered. "According to a rumor I heard, the goblins didn't even know what hit them."

"And that means it was an inside job," Cassane finished, rising slowly to his feet and facing the fire, sending a few jets of sparks into the flames with prods of his wand. "The new bank executives – most probably wizard defectors from Gringotts – likely bought off or coerced enough goblins to break through backdoor security and bring the Grandmother Nifflers in, because there's no way in hell they got that many goblins on their side –"

"I'm sorry, the what?"

"Giant, overgrown versions of those scavenging pests that are used when transporting gold in huge quantities," Cassane said, a hint of a

grin on his face. "Originally bred in Algeria and shipped over here, they have these sacs under their jaw where they can swallow and release gold on command. To move all that gold magically would take a prodigious amount of skill, and unless Lord Voldemort went in there himself, they would have had no chance of getting it out without those beasts. Also handy considering that once released, the goblins would have no easy way of bringing a Grandmother Niffler back under their control without a wand."

"Wait a second, how much gold are we talking about?" Harry asked, a note of fear creeping into his voice, despite all of his efforts to keep it out.

"In the millions of Galleons," Fleur said unsteadily. "And judging from what I remember of goblin security, if there was a fight in the vaults..."

"Who knows how much money is now missing and unaccounted for," Cassane said grimly, turning back towards Harry. "There's going to be hell to pay for this..."

"Hang on, what about my vault?" Harry asked frantically. "I mean, they might not have my key –"

"The goblins will have a master," Fleur interrupted. "But there's no chance of them withdrawing any of your money without your blood-sealed permission..."

Her voice trailed off, because Harry had just shot to his feet, his eyes wild with realization.

"They have my blood," he whispered. "The paper I signed and sealed, back when I pled guilty on those charges... oh fuck, they have my blood, and if the Ministry supported it all, it's all going straight into Malfoy's pocket..."

"Harry, there's no guarantee –"

He could hardly breathe, could hardly believe what he was hearing. His hands were shaking, but his eyes never lost their focus - if

anything, it all seemed so clear - as the older man sat down wearily in the armchair next to the fire.

"Yes," Cassane said quietly, vacantly, his voice faintly echoing across the darkened room, finally meeting Harry's eyes with his own. "That's been their plan all along, and this time you can't stop them. You're going to lose, Harry. You're going to lose... everything."

"Merde, no, Harry!" Fleur exclaimed, shooting to her feet as quickly as her heels would allow. "There's no guarantee –"

"If Malfoy's behind it, there is a fucking guarantee!" Harry snarled, slamming his fist against the fireplace mantel. "I should have killed that rat-bastard when I had the chance –"

"Right now, murdering Lucius Malfoy might not be the easiest way to resolve the biggest problem we might have," Cassane said sharply, rising to his feet as he emptied his tumbler. "As I am quite certain any vaults of Ministry gold will have long been emptied by now, the goblins will likely turn to a more violent approach."

"Fudge's announcement," Harry said savagely. "We should just let the goblins kill him –"

"That's the last thing we'd want to do right now!" Cassane interrupted, fixing Harry with a disapproving stare. "If I'm correct, you've opened your own negotiations with the goblins, am I correct, Harry?"

"Yeah, through her," Harry said, his gaze snapping to Fleur. His eyes suddenly brightened as he understood what Cassane wanted. "Do you think she can –"

"All we need is time right now," Cassane said softly. "Miss Delacour, go to the goblins and tell them that they have traitors in their ranks. They've doubtlessly already realized this, but it might buy us more time if they cull their ranks instead of slaughtering innocent witches and wizards in a rampage through Diagon Alley."

"But... but they won't listen to me!" Fleur protested, her eyes wide. "I'm français, and not even full-human –"

"And you're in this position for exactly the same reason that they are, or close enough to it," Cassane replied curtly. "And if you don't hurry, a lot of people are going to die."

"Go, Fleur, and be careful," Harry said firmly, trying desperately to ignore the horrified expression on her face as she left the room.

The front door slammed loudly, leaving Harry and Cassane alone in the house.

"Her words won't be enough," Cassane said softly, "especially if any goblins died. She's making a steep accusation, accusing one of them of this brand of treason."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Harry said angrily, rounding on Cassane. "As long as you continue to stand on the sidelines here –"

"Harry, there's nothing more I can do!" Cassane snapped as he strode across his foyer into his drawing room. The fire exploded into the grate with only a glance, and Harry could see the brass instruments begin whirling around the room in a haze of magic. "The goblins won't listen to me anymore than they'll listen to you – I've had issues with them in the past, one reason I don't keep any of my money in Gringotts. And one of the reasons I don't think this new bank idea is that bad at all."

"What?"

"The magical economy, if it wants to modernize, needs competition!" Cassane exclaimed, his face filled with concentration as he raised his wand. Dozens of candles exploded into light along the walls, and Harry could see books leaping off the shelves and spreading themselves on the cluttered table. "The goblins, with their monopoly, have been stifling that for generations. If anything, this plan shows Voldemort's brilliance – he comes with an idea that would be ingenious for the wizarding world follow, and then he perverts it to his own ends. Still doesn't stop making the idea good, though!"

"They took all my gold –"

"Harry, you're going to have to face the facts here," Cassane said, jabbing his wand at the massive map of the world nailed to the wall. All at once, dozens of green and orange regions lit up across it, most stretching across Europe and North America, although a few patches appeared around the very tip of South America and the Far East. One lone green light even appeared in Antarctica. "The green regions on this map represent the areas where there is a modicum of magical society, and the orange regions represent regions where there are enough goblins to be a problem. Gringotts is mostly global – patchy in the Americas, but so is magical civilization over there. The point is, if this new bank gets a hold, we aren't talking about a localized goblin rebellion. Oh no, this'll go international – fast. The other Ministries will see it and want to try it for themselves, and with Voldemort's agents across the world, it's only a matter of time. We need to defuse the situation here.

"And that means diplomacy like the International Confederation of Wizards hasn't had to deal with since the eighteenth century," Cassane finished, lowering his wand and turning back towards Harry. "And given how everything is hitting the fan – once again, Voldemort knows what the hell he's doing – odds are you aren't getting your money back anytime soon."

"I'm not going to let Malfoy get away with this!" Harry said furiously.

"I'm not saying you should!" Cassane retorted. "But this has rapidly become big – very big. This could very quickly spark a war if we are not exceedingly careful – and right now, killing Lucius Malfoy would only make things worse. The man is predictable, and while Voldemort is not, he is a factor we can manipulate to our advantage. What we need to do when approaching a problem such as this one is eliminate those things that could cause unpredictability. I'm assuming you've already contacted Dumbledore?"

Harry nodded once, his mind whirling as Cassane pulled open another book and began reading very quickly.

"The goblins are predictable – they hate us passionately, and that makes their actions and thoughts easy to track," Cassane continued, his voice getting faster and faster as he flipped open another book.

"The press, on the other hand – both domestic and international papers cannot know about the new bank until the goblins have been calmed sufficiently to make this clean. By forcing the transfers – which he assuredly knows about by now – he's made his biggest blunder yet –"

"I think he's more focused on Dumbledore than the banks –"

"To his peril," Cassane muttered. "The Prophet –"

"Cuffe's been arrested and I've already dealt with him," Harry added quickly. "He won't be a problem."

Cassane raised an eyebrow skeptically. "And how did you manage that with such alacrity, Mr. Potter?"

"Persuasion," Harry replied shortly, his eyes shooting back to the map. "So I guess the only thing I can really handle now is Fudge and any other Death Eaters that Voldemort might have getting in the way – and we have until nine this morning to neutralize them."

"The issue will be the foreign journalists," Cassane said quietly, pulling a quill from his desk and beginning to scrawl a list across a scrap of yellowed paper. "I'll speak to the embassies about getting them out of the country – it'll raise eyebrows, but it could be worse. But Fudge won't just let them go."

"Then we make him let them go," Harry growled. "Tonight, before anything happens, we get them all out, and Fudge won't be the wiser."

Cassane paused, his quill dripping slowly onto the page, leaving a hint of a splotch. "It's the only thing you can do at this point, particularly given the security surrounding Fudge – you'd never get close enough to bring him down personally. You do realize, though," he added slowly, "that I can't be seen to assist you in this matter, given my position – and nor can Dumbledore, if he wishes to protect any support he still has within the Ministry"

"I understand."

A slow smile was crept onto Cassane's face. "You already have a plan."

"Enough of one," Harry muttered.

"And my assistance —"

"Wasn't even expected." Harry said coolly, taking the list of journalists from Cassane's hand.

"You do remind me of your father, Harry."

"Perhaps," Harry muttered, putting aside the sudden rush of emotion he heard at the words. "Just make sure to tell me something about him if I get back alive. I'd hate to meet him and have nothing to talk about."

Author's Notes - the warnings here are for violence and disturbing content - and a lot of both. And just as a hint, the working title of this chapter was 'Consequences' - continue to read, and you'll see exactly why. In any case, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

The two old men – one human, one goblin – stood across from each other, a long, polished mahogany table between them. The room was dark, lit only by a few sputtering candles and smoldering ashes in the fireplace. A few chairs were strewn about the room, all of the same polished mahogany – and none of them were sized to fit a full-grown human. Very few wizards had ever gained access to this very private, very executive conference room, with arched ceilings, high windows, walls of cold tan marble.

But Albus Dumbledore knew that the future – at least the next few hours of it – would likely be determined by the words that were spoken in this room.

"You shouldn't have come, Dumbledore," the goblin rasped in Gobbledegook. His leathery scalp was lined and covered with patchy white hair, but there was a shrewdness – and a deep-seated rage – that burned in the ancient goblin's eyes. "Not now."

"You know as well as I that we have no time," Dumbledore replied evenly in the same language, his eyes never leaving the goblin. "And we are alone – no malcontents here to interfere."

"They've all been expelled from Gringotts," the goblin growled. "The humans, I refer to."

"Even the loyalists?"

"We do not have a cause in common, Dumbledore – not after what happened tonight. And we are not a peace-loving people."

"Abnerak, you do not approve of war – we've known each other long enough –"

"War can be profitable, as you and I both know!" the goblin snarled. "But only if enough infrastructure remains intact. This war... this will not bring Gringotts or my people gold – or freedom."

"So you believe me – that Lord Voldemort has returned."

"I don't speak of that," Abnerak retorted sharply. "I speak of the conflict between you and the Ministry – and of the new bank." The goblin spat the word like it was poison in his mouth. "The treaties have been broken, my employees have been murdered, and most importantly, gold has been taken from us."

"Not by me, or by my actions," Dumbledore said quickly. "Although I approve of the idea of a competitive market –"

"It is not the idea I dislike – I understand enough economics to recognize stagnation when I see it. But the traitorous methods in its pursuit are unacceptable, and the deaths of my employees will not be taken lightly." The goblin's eyes flashed again, and Dumbledore knew that even attempting to make eye contact for Legilimency with the goblin would be fruitless.

"It would be easier, you know, if you returned to the table –"

"I would, but the board has already ruled against me," Abnerak said flatly, drumming his long fingers on the table. "And despite my rationality, I will not risk my position by blatantly interfering."

"So you will attack," Dumbledore said grimly, switching to English as he looked towards the windows. The sky was only beginning to brighten, sending dim tendrils of light sliding between the velvet curtains. "You do realize that I will not tolerate collateral damage."

"Dumbledore, most of your nation has vaults within our walls," the goblin said, awkwardly switching to English after a few seconds, and pausing after every word. "It would be... unwise to take action that could potentially jeopardize that capital."

"Then you must take action to prevent the attack –"

"Dumbledore, I cannot," Abnerak hissed. "Despite my preference for cooperation – it leads to better business, and it has kept both our worlds mostly safe for almost a century – I no longer have the same sway that I once did. There are radical elements that I will not be able to control – and besides, Fudge's death will be beneficial for us both –"

"Not unless Umbridge falls with him," Dumbledore said grimly, "else we risk anarchy – and Voldemort's ascension. The Ministry is in disarray, Abnerak – it will not take much to bring it down. And that," he finished, turning back to face the old goblin, "is the last thing we both need right now."

There was silence in the room for a few long seconds, and then –

"If you take action against the citizens of wizarding England, I will not stand on the sidelines," Dumbledore said grimly. "It will not stand."

"I will do my best to minimize casualties, but I can promise no more," Abnerak replied curtly, running a long finger through one of the tufts of white hair on his head. "Is there anything more we need to speak about? The Potter negotiations?"

"You know as well as... I'm sorry?" Dumbledore paused for a half second as the words sunk into his mind. Merlin, Harry...

"Your name had been mentioned, I assumed you were one of the negotiating parties," Abnerak said suspiciously, his brow furrowing. "I was going to tell you – given I won't likely be seeing the quarter-whore for some time – that the party of Gringotts agrees to the terms set down by the party of Desdame & Vuneren on behalf of one Harry James Potter –"

Dumbledore felt a chill surge down his spine, and he quickly looked away, keeping his expression carefully blank as his mind churned. He knew as well as anyone that there was no such legal firm as 'Desdame & Vuneren' – and given their records, so did the goblins. A clever front indeed, Harry... you've done better than I hoped... and one of the last things I had wanted.

"Excuse me, Abnerak, might I call my phoenix?" he asked courteously. "I have a message that I need to get to Hogwarts, and our Floo is being monitored."

"Not in this room you're not," the old goblin retorted haughtily. "This wood is extremely expensive –"

"Not that kind of phoenix, my friend," Dumbledore said with a hint of a forced smile as he drew his wand. "Expecto patronum."

The massive silvery bird erupted from Dumbledore's wand, and in a second, the room was filled with the beautiful, unearthly sound of phoenix song. Dumbledore waited until the ghostly creature had landed on the table, and then began to speak very quickly.

"Severus Snape, you are in great danger. Get out of Hogwarts immediately – I will contact you when you can return."

The Patronus trilled loudly before sliding through a tiny gap in the window sill, soaring into the night. Abnerak, who had been watching Dumbledore's every gesture with his wand, did not relax as he put the wand away.

"How much time do I have?" Dumbledore asked simply.

"It's six," Abnerak said curtly. "The speech is at nine. Three hours."

"It will be enough. And as I suspect this room is charmed to block Apparition, might you escort me to some place I might be able to leave swiftly?"

"The Ministry is under enchantments to block Apparition, we received a message from the Department of Magical Finance this morning about it – likely incoming Portkeys as well by now, they're trying to lock the entire place down –"

"Then I will need Fawkes after all," Dumbledore said calmly. "If you might open a window?"

Fred and George exchanged glances before looking back at Tonks, identical incredulous looks on their faces.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"And I'm not even telling you half of this mess," Tonks said quickly, her eyes scanning the ruins of the Shrieking Shack for any mysterious shadows not caused by the faint glow on the edge of the horizon. After the attack from Sirius, she wasn't willing to take any more chances. "In any case, Harry needs to get the international journalists out of the Ministry and into the hands of a more responsible party – preferably the Order. That way, they can hear his piece and Dumbledore's, and Fudge will be disgraced clear out of office before he can declare his war."

"And you're asking us to help you?" George asked, his eyes widening slightly. "I mean, Tonks, we might be two of the most strikingly brilliant and handsome examples of the human form, but what about the Order?"

Tonks paused, considering her words extremely carefully as she paced towards one of the few surviving foundation stones that had been blasted free of the ground in the explosion. "Believe me, if we had that option at the moment, I'd use it first, but if there is a fight, the last thing we need is to polarize the Ministry against the Order – it'd be exactly what You-Know-Who wants. Plus, Harry trusts you both."

"Didn't sound like it when he cussed us out earlier," Fred muttered.

"Well, that's Harry these days for you," Tonks retorted, trying to contain her impatience as she rounded on the twins. "If you knew half of what he's been through –"

"I'm assuming that's the half you're not telling us –"

"– Then you'd understand where he's coming from," Tonks snapped, her hair going jet black a second later as her eyes flashed emerald green.

Fred and George exchanged looks again. "Er... Tonks..." Fred began slowly.

"Sorry," Tonks said, suddenly noticing the different shades and unconsciously changing her hair back to pink. That's strange... and entirely too fast...

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

"So you want us to be Harry's backup in there?" Fred demanded.

"Look, I caught a glimpse of some of those fireworks that you dropped in the Great Hall when Dumbledore threw Umbridge out," Tonks said, lowering her voice as a hint of a devious grin crept onto her face. "Do you have any of those left?"

George winced. "Uh..."

Tonks' face fell. "Damn it! That could have actually worked –"

"Now hang on," Fred interrupted. "We do have another solution. A lot of those fireworks were made with Combustion Concoction, and that's a pretty damn good explosive all on its own. If you want us to be blowing things up, all we need is a lot of that potion and we can supercharge it."

"And where am I supposed to be getting Combustion Concoction at six in the bloody morning?" Tonks asked exasperatedly.

"Try one of the goblin shops in Diagon Alley," a new voice said from the shadows.

Tonks' wand was out in a second, and Fred and George were startlingly close behind her, pointing at the silver-haired man in an outdated grey suit approaching them, his lined face tight and strained into a grim mask as he navigated through the piles of debris and ashes.

Tonks lowered her wand instantly as she recognized the man – he had been the Prophet a fair bit recently. Finally, an ally... of sorts.

"Considering the goblins are going to be bombing Diagon Alley," Nathan Cassane continued, raising a hand as a crafty smile crept across his face, "you'll find plenty of explosives, Miss Tonks, and I'm sure with enough gold, the goblins will have no qualms parting with Combustion Concoction ample for your purposes."

"Mr. Cassane," Tonks said with relief, her breathing easing slightly. "So Harry convinced you after all –"

"I'm still not interfering in this," Cassane cut her off shortly, "but it is in my best interests that you and Harry have some success in this matter. Civil war is the last thing our world needs right now, and you have no idea how close to the brink we are. Furthermore, I feel obliged to inform you that the Order has, once again, been compromised."

"What?"

"The Ministry has captured one of the Order's agents, apparently caught on an espionage mission, and they plan to haul him out to the podium when Fudge makes his grand announcement," Cassane said, his voice filling with disgust as he stepped closer, charred wood crunching under foot. "And no, I didn't tell Harry – the last thing he needs is a distraction right now, and this is the Order's problem."

"And what is Fudge going to do when the announcement is over?"

Cassane shrugged. "Probably have him sent to Azkaban or Kissed after being interrogated for everything he knows. Probably not much, considering Dumbledore would never have let that werewolf try something like this –"

Tonks' heart started to hammer in her chest as both of the twins swore simultaneously. They got Lupin... Merlin's fucking wand, they got Lupin, and when they kill him, every single werewolf will go to Voldemort –

Suddenly, she realized something and her eyebrows shot together with suspicion. "Wait a second – Lupin was underground with the werewolves! How the hell did he end up in the Ministry anyway?"

"Well, Dumbledore would never have authorized the mission, and since I'm fairly confident Lupin would rather piss on an electric fence than join Voldemort, my guess he was trying to do something noble – like rescuing that Weasley dragon tamer that's in the medical ward at the Ministry –"

"Charlie?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Cassane said thoughtfully. "My guess is he did it as a favour for the rest of the Weasley family..."

"Hold on, there's no way he would have directly countermanded Dumbledore's orders –"

"Tonks, you hold on!" Fred interrupted loudly. "This is a family issue, and who the hell is this guy?"

"Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards Nathan Cassane, at your service," Cassane replied immediately, inclining his head with sudden recognition.

His eyes hardened suddenly. "So, which of you is Ronald Weasley?"

The twins exchanged shocked glances now, before looking back at the imposing older man.

"Uh... he's our brother..."

Cassane pulled a small envelope from his pocket and tossed it, leaving George to scramble for the paper and unfold it quickly, scanning every line –

"Apparently, he and that other writer decided that my attentions need to be drawn to events at Hogwarts that I've already stated I will not involve myself in," Cassane said coolly, "and that it was an extremely

stupid move to send that letter with that sort of detail, particularly if the owl had been intercepted –"

"Definitely true," Fred agreed, his face paling as he saw the dispassionate expression on Cassane's face.

"Except Ron never wrote this," George finished softly.

"Of course he didn't," Cassane said impatiently. "That's a girl's writing –"

"No, Ron would never write this," George said, his eyes finally meeting Cassane's. "He values his friendship too much with Harry... he would never have said things like this..."

Hermione, Tonks thought, and for a reason she couldn't quite fathom, her gut inexplicably surged with anger. You stupid girl, what have you done...

"It doesn't matter, because if the Ministry has discovered I received this letter, I'm involved in this mess now," Cassane growled, his brown eyes flashing as his shoe crunched on the remnants of a charred floorboard. He pulled a small sack of gold from a pocket in his jacket and tossed it at Fred, who awkwardly caught it and held it gingerly, as if Cassane had just thrown him a hand grenade. "And that means, I'm going to do what Remus Lupin couldn't do, while you buy the explosives you need to cripple the Ministry."

"What? Cassane, you can't just –"

"You stay out of this," Cassane snapped, his gaze snapping to Tonks for a few seconds. "Harry's in over his head more than he can imagine, and he's going to end up dead unless you get back to the Ministry to his side. The magic you two have gotten into – and likely botched, if my assumptions are correct – will be disastrous if he attempts to utilize it in the Ministry, and he doesn't have the training to fend off the squads that Umbridge has gathered there."

Tonks' breath nearly caught in her chest and she involuntarily took a step back.

He knows... and from the look on his face, he's known since the bloody beginning –

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

"What about Dumbledore?" George said angrily. "Can't he do something at this point –"

"Dumbledore's flying straight into a trap," Cassane cut George's words off with a wave of his hand, "but Harry seems to have planned for this – or at least not expected his help. And Voldemort really is a fucking clever bastard when he wants to be. But that's irrelevant. You two get the explosives with that money, and me... well, I'll go to the Ministry and save the Order again." Cassane smiled, but this time, his smile was filled with bitterness. "Just like old times."

Dumbledore landed a little harder than he had wanted behind the overflowing skip, but he didn't falter as he approached the red telephone box. Flying through the open sky with Fawkes would normally have been disastrous, but he knew his Disillusionment Charms would suffice, particularly in the red-tinted, cloudless sky.

He muttered a few words and tapped his glasses, and suddenly the world lit up in blazing colours, shining even brighter than the red-tinged dawn. Solid surfaces dimmed in his eyes, becoming almost translucent in places. Squinting downwards, he could see straight through the concrete, into the massive atrium below his feet.

The Ministry of Magic.

Dumbledore frowned as he noted the strange colours of the enchantments ribbing the underground building like columns, particularly the sickly red of the Anti-Apparition enchantment and the sulfurous yellow of a spell he knew would block Portkeys. Clearly, Fudge wasn't taking any chances...

He drew his wand as his frown deepened. Something was wrong about those colours – the shades of the enchantment arches were not quite right, a bit lighter than they should be...

Then he saw it, and despite himself, he smiled.

"So you did more things than steal the prophecy when you came here, didn't you, Tom?" he whispered as he tapped his glasses again, this time with his wand. Immediately, the columns darkened slightly in his view – revealing the poisonous-looking veins of a spell that had filled every enchantment like blood vessels in a body.

Dumbledore immediately recognized the spell – it was very similar to the magic that Voldemort had used to seal away Grimmauld Place, except much more finely crafted – after all, Ministry workers had to be able to get in. But any attempt from him – and from the looks of the spell, Voldemort constructed it for Dumbledore specifically – to enter would be suicidal.

And if Dumbledore even tried to bring down any of the enchantments from outside, the entire Ministry would be incinerated.

"Very good, Tom," Dumbledore murmured as he scanned the threads of the spell for a hint of any weakness. Voldemort was thorough – it looked as though that spell would even prevent Fawkes from getting him in. "Very good indeed..."

Suddenly, he spotted the flaw – and he shook his head with admiration. Voldemort had planned every second of this, knowing that there would only be one choice for Dumbledore when he arrived.

"Well," he said to himself as he tapped his glasses again with his wand and then with the tips of his fingers, "it's been a while since I've used the visitor's entrance."

He approached the tiny booth and squeezed himself through the door, snapping it shut with a flick of his wand. Another flick dialed five numbers into the twisted telephone –

The first curse erupted from the floor, but Dumbledore had been expecting the rush of flames the second he had stepped into the booth, and was easily prepared for it. The Flame-Freezing Charm, while giving the entire booth the slightly horrifying image of

immolating internally, made Dumbledore feel much like he was being tickled all over his body.

It was more comforting than he was willing to admit, and he shoved away the distracting sensation as he worked to regain his concentration. He didn't dare dispel the charm just yet – he suspected it was likely the only thing that prevented him from being hit with something far worse.

He didn't hear the smooth female voice of the receptionist, but he had expected this – he wasn't exactly welcome anymore in the Ministry. Regardless, he spoke aloud.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, to speak with Minister for Magic Cornelius Oswald Fudge!"

It was a bit of a letdown that the badge didn't drop from the steadily melting phone – it would have been a nice souvenir – but he paid it no mind as he carefully aimed his wand at the glowing floor beneath his boots.

There was a rumbling shudder as the booth sank into the ground, and Dumbledore began to mutter the words of the spells he would need to slice through the protective enchantments surrounding the Ministry –

He froze suddenly as the charm dissolved around him. Something was wrong – terribly wrong.

The flames were still surrounding him, but he could not hear them crackle and sputter... no, that wasn't right, he could still hear something faintly, but it was almost as if someone had drawn the noise of a single crackle out, dragging the single discordant snap longer and longer...

He suddenly remembered the words he had spoken to Snape only hours earlier: my suspicion is that this is a temporal distortion...

He suddenly realized his error, and he cursed himself silently for the mistake. He had been caught up in Sirius' sudden arrival, the creation of the new bank, and the rest of the whirlwind of events, that he had

not seen the tiny, ingenious trap that Voldemort had created, surrounding the one entrance Dumbledore had no choice but to use, inspired by the very magic now surrounding the school he once cherished... a trap that held him suspended in time, trapped in a tiny booth, as the flames sucked away precious oxygen.

Well, Dumbledore thought wryly for a moment, it does prove I'm only human.

But his thoughts were immediately sobered by the image of Voldemort laughing as he approached Harry, who wouldn't even see the devious mastermind coming...

Dumbledore's mind began to race against time – literally, as time was slipping away like water precariously cupped in a man's hand – as he searched for a solution. Something, anything, which would allow him to escape...

Time stopped, and only Dumbledore's mind kept moving in the flames.

Reg Cattermole did not like his job.

It wasn't like he hated it, like some of the members of the Department of Magical Maintenance. Of all of his colleagues, he was probably the least likely to go postal and cause chaos in the Ministry.

"As if the Ministry needs any more of it," Reg grumbled to himself, rubbing the sheen of sweat away from his face as he walked away from the three Hit Wizards who had stopped him in the hall and demanded identification. He wasn't entirely surprised that the encounter had been abrupt – that entire Department had been in a foul temper since midsummer – but there was something about them that seemed different, as though all of them were on edge about something...

He sighed heavily, twirled his old wand around his finger, and continued down the dank hallway just past the Auror Office, towards the last rooms to clean. He expected it to be an easy job – after all, the make-shift Ministry morgue was seldom used these days, and the

rest of the rooms were just storage cabinets. Just a quick Scouring Charm and things would be –

"Don't even... you wouldn't dare..."

He heard the snatches of raised voices ahead, and he groaned. It was likely an Auror and Hit Wizard arguing again. Just what I bloody need...

"Just stay out my way –"

"You have your orders," a slow, deep male voice said sternly. "Orders straight from –"

"And I'm telling you to forget it!" the other, female voice said. Reg crept a bit closer – it appeared the voices were coming from one of the tiny meeting rooms that doubled as official interrogation rooms for minimum security prisoners. It was only a quirk that he could hear anything – the heavy door had been left slightly ajar. "I'm doing this my way, and with everything we've seen, so should you! His plan is only going to lead to disaster the way you're telling it, and when this blows up in your face –"

"You think I'm not uncomfortable with this?" the male voice snapped, his patience clearly straining. "This goes against everything – everything – that I believe in –"

"Then don't do it! Even you succeed –"

"We could stop this whole war before it begins!"

"I'm sure that was the rationale Dumbledore gave you," the female voice said scornfully. "You're smarter than this – you know everything will go to hell –"

"And what happens if we don't act? We just let the goblins –"

"The longer that fool stays alive, the better," the female voice said evenly. "He's the devil we know..."

Reg had heard enough, and he picked up his pace – they had started talking about Fudge, and that was an argument he'd heard eight times already that night. Even though the context was unclear – and more than a little disconcerting – he knew the basic premise: whether Fudge was doing the right or the wrong thing. It had divided most of the Ministry over the past few weeks, and Reg was heartily sick of it. As long as he knew where his next paycheck was coming, he didn't give a damn.

A wave of his wand and a muttered 'Alohomora' unlocked the door to the Ministry morgue, and he wrinkled his nose at the stench of Muggle formaldehyde and the sickly sweet odor of Preservation formula. Unlike most Ministry rooms, there was much less of the clutter and disorder typically seen where wizards worked. Only a few crumpled paper airplane memos fluttered weakly on the desk, next to several heavy casks of potion and a neatly stacked pile of steel dissection tools.

Reg ignored all of them. Even despite the thin patina of dust covering most of the tools, he wasn't about to touch them. Even though the damn things need a good dusting, I just need to take care of the floors, table, cabinets and move on –

He paused, and squinted down at some of the tools. He'd been wrong – it wasn't dust at all. Someone had actually cleaned them, planning to use them...

He looked at the one wall at the end of the room he wasn't allowed to clean. Heavily enchanted with dozens of Preservation Charms, the wall was covered in dust – except for a small square, surrounding a single drawer in the middle –

He couldn't get his wand up in time, and the inch-thick steel plate soaring out of the wall hit him straight in the gut, sending him crashing to the floor. He opened his mouth to howl in pain, but he shut it a second later in wide-eyed horror, as a pale feminine hand slid out of the pitch-black hole behind the smoking hinges.

It took him a few seconds to realize the hand was holding a wand.

"Stupefy!"

There was a flash of brilliant red light, a screaming pain through the front of his head, the sharp taste of hot blood in his mouth, and Reg Cattermole felt no more.

"Why won't the damn wolf get up..."

"Come on, Lupin, you've got an appointment –"

"I'm awake," Remus Lupin mumbled, wearily opening his eyes, blinking rapidly as the bright light burned his retinas. At least it was warming the room a bit – the hard stone and even harder cot had made it impossible to stay awake.

"You're awake, but you're not moving," the first man growled, whose burly silhouette provided merciful relief against the light as he moved closer. "Get up!"

Lupin glared daggers at the two figures. "Where are the Hit Wizards that brought me in – I demand to see my –"

"Dangerous creatures don't get legal counsel," the second, older man interrupted, shoving back his cloak to reveal a wickedly sharp, short-hafted axe. "About damn time that law was pushed through."

"And neither should traitors, but that's all in good time," the first man snapped. "Now get the hell up!"

Lupin didn't move another inch – his eyes had locked on the axe, a horrifyingly familiar rush of fear surging through his body.

The silver axe.

"Ah, recognize this, werewolf?" the second man growled. "You know what it does, you treasonous little dog, and I've been waiting for this for a long time –"

"Greyback took your daughter, Otterson," Lupin whispered. "It wasn't me, and you know it. You know me!"

"Maybe I don't," Steven Otterson rasped, his fingers tightening on the haft of the axe. "The werewolf I might have fought with in the First War didn't run with the wolves and filth like Greyback – like you clearly have been. You reek of the warrens!"

Lupin tried to keep the blood from draining from his face. Otterson was right – he did still have the distinctive odor of someone who had been in Greyback's underground hovels. The stench of excrement and blood that was impossible to get out of clothes of any kind –

"We're wasting time," the first man snarled, tossing back his cloak and taking the axe into his own hands. "Fudge wants him alive, but he didn't say what condition."

Otterson's gaze snapped to the other man. "Curtis, there's due process –"

"Which means jack shit when those filthy animals eat your family!" the other man suddenly shouted, drawing his wand in his other hand and stepping into the tiny cell. "I'll thank Walden for this when he comes back from vacation –"

"You can't maim him, Ryans!" Otterson yelled, grabbing the other man's wrist before he could raise the axe. Lupin used the second of distraction to inch a little higher off the cot, his eyes not leaving the axe blade. "He's meeting the Minister!"

Ryans paused, and Lupin's eyes had adjusted enough so he could see his face – his haunted, tear-streaked face. For a second, Lupin felt a tremor of fear – and guilt. The pack had gone after the man's family, and in the insanity, nothing had likely been reported – if the Ministry even knew. I didn't even know, and I should have...

But Voldemort would have known about the killings, he thought with growing horror, and if what I heard about Sirius... about Sirius working with Voldemort... well, if it's true, he knows I'm in the Order

and have been spying on Greyback... and it's the perfect time to get rid of me, getting Macnair to tell these poor men –

"It's only if the maiming is visible," Ryans said slowly, looking down at his axe, his hands steady with terrible purpose. "So I'll just chop his cock off –"

"What?"

"And nobody will ever know," Ryans finished, a strangely detached look on his face. "He won't be a father like me – but if I remember his file correctly, such an alteration would be doing him a favour, save him the guilt eventually –"

"Ryans –"

"You don't have to watch, Otterson," Ryans whispered, a wave of his wand forcibly yanking Lupin to his feet. Another wave, and Lupin began to feel his frayed zipper beginning to slide down. He began thrashing as the axe moved closer, but he couldn't free – he couldn't free his hands!

"That's good, 'cause that's sick," Otterson muttered as he retched. "Not to mention wrong in so many ways..."

"Are you going to stop me?" Ryans snarled, rounding furiously on his thinner partner even as he held back a shudder. "After what they did to Michelle? Are you?"

Otterson didn't answer, and for a moment, Lupin's fevered mind had a glimpse of hope.

That hope died a second later, when Otterson swallowed hard, turned around, and walked through the heavy wooden door, closing it softly behind him.

Lupin began to breathe very fast. His eyes never left the axe as it rose, beginning its lazy arc. His heart was hammering as his disbelief grew greater and greater. This couldn't be happening, no, he wasn't going to lose his manhood, not like this –

"Trust me, Lupin, it'll be better for all of us."

"No!" Lupin howled, trying to pull himself away from the trajectory of the silver blade, which had reached the apex and was coming down –

BANG.

Ryans stumbled, his momentum fading. "What the –"

His words were cut off by a piercing scream, and the axe was ripped from his hand – along with three of his fingers and most of his palm. Blood, pumping furiously, leaked from the horrendous wound, and Lupin's stomach warred with his mind as he fought to vomit.

Ryans struggled to turn around, but a second later, he was hoisted by his ankles into the air with a single skyward flick of a wand. Another delicate flick sent his head upwards – towards the low, lightless stone ceiling.

There was an audible, unmistakable crunch, and Lupin swallowed back bile as the body suddenly went limp, hovering like a broken puppet in mid-air. He had heard a crunch like that before – when Greyback had bitten down upon a still-quivering rabbit's throat.

His hands seemed to have a life of their own, as he hastily yanked his pants back up and scooped up the wand that had fallen from Ryans' limp hands –

The only thing he had time to do, before a black-gloved hand had pinned him against the side wall by his throat, the wand slipping from his fingers.

"You," Nathan Cassane said softly, his own wand pointed at his pinning arm, lending him a bit of extra strength to keep Lupin choking on the wall a few feet above the ground, "are an idiot."

"I... I –"

"I don't want excuses, Lupin, because I know damned well Dumbledore didn't order you here, he's smarter than that." Cassane said curtly. "What I do want to know is why the hell you chose to spring Charlie Weasley out of the bloody Ministry of Magic! And on your own, no less!"

Lupin gasped for air and tried to struggle, but just like before, he had been magically immobilized. "Just –"

"Who sent you, Lupin?" Cassane whispered distractedly, pulling his wand from his own arm for a second to wave at the floating body behind him, which fell with a rather sodden crunch to the floor. Lupin fought to control his stomach. "Was it the Weasleys? Were they idiotic enough to send you alone?"

"I... I... don't..."

"You don't what?" Cassane said softly. The older man's brown eyes blazed, and for a second, Lupin didn't need magic to remain perfectly still. He remembered that look – he had seen it before, over fifteen years ago...

"You don't know WHAT?"

"I don't... remember!" Lupin wheezed.

Cassane seemed to consider this. Then, after a few seconds, he shrugged and let go of Lupin, letting the werewolf fall awkwardly to the floor.

"Look," Lupin panted, as he picked up Ryans' wand, "the last thing I remember is –"

"Don't use that, here's yours," Cassane said distractedly, his eyes fixed on the corpse on the floor as he tossed a wand back to Lupin – a wand, to Lupin's amazement, that was indeed his own.

"The last thing I remember before here is dropping Snape off at Hogwarts and heading back underground," Lupin replied, tucking

Ryans' wand into his tattered pocket anyways. "Then I wake up in this cell, and –"

"Imperiused and Obliviated," Cassane cut Lupin off, as he cleaned the small stain of blood off his shoes with a grimace and a flick of his wand. "Definitely Malfoy's style – made sense the bastard was doing something else besides picking up Snape."

"What? How did you?"

"It's not important. What is important is you getting out of here – I've already freed Charlie, so don't waste your time with that – before you look any worse than you already do," Cassane replied, finally meeting Lupin's eyes as the light outside the room began to sputter. Just outside the door, Lupin could see a small trickle of blood creeping around the edge of the doorway, and he shuddered.

"The memories come back fast, don't they?" Cassane whispered, as he pointed his wand at Ryans' body. "Evanesco."

Lupin didn't speak as the corpse and blood vanished.

"Too fast," Cassane continued, blithely touching his wand to his temple, drawing a long silver strand from his nearly combed hair. The strand was almost liquid – before the tip of Cassane's wand burned red, sizzling the strand away to nothingness.

He turned to Lupin suddenly, his eyes hooded. "It's better I don't know, but some people need to know things. Remus, if you don't come clean to Harry Potter, you won't be alive long enough to regret it – and neither will Snape."

Lupin began to respond, but Cassane was already walking away, not even noticing the headless corpse of Steven Otterson slumped against the open door.

The Dark Mark burned black, and Snape only barely restrained a strangled yelp as he shot up from his bed, his black hair a tangled mess around his face. His body was soaked with sweat, and he was shaking as the pain rocketed up his arm –

"Now, that's awfully unpleasant, isn't it?"

"PEEVES!"

The poltergeist roared with laughter that danced across the entirety of his insane vocal range, the echo banging off the walls of the darkened sleeping quarters like a hundred banging gongs –

"Too late, too late, too late!" Peeves cackled, spinning around the room. "And the phoenix will never reach here to give the warning!"

"I swear to Merlin, Peeves, if you don't get out now I will –"

But Peeves only laughed harder. "You can do nothing to me, Severus! Nothing at all! Nothing, nothing, nothing! But..."

The poltergeist suddenly stopped moving, freezing in mid-air, his eyes finally fixing on Snape's livid face.

"You have a mission."

"I don't take orders from you!" Snape snarled, seizing his wand and brandishing it at Peeves.

"But you take orders from Lily, don't you?" Peeves said, his smile growing only more sadistic every second as he drew himself up into a grotesque mockery of a girl. "Severus, please! Save my son –"

The false, high pitched voice was nearly cut off by Snape's first three curses, but Peeves dodged the spells with another cackle.

"No, but seriously," Peeves said, his voice abruptly business-like, although the ghastly smile never dimmed. "You might want to get to the Ministry, otherwise Lily's sweet little Harry Potter is going to die a horrible death, and you will have failed again, and there will be nothing left for you to live for. So you should go save Harry Potter – or just save yourself the trouble and kill yourself."

Snape said nothing, as the horrifying realization of his dilemma sunk in, his Mark burning hotter every second.

"Trust me on this one, Severus," Peeves said with a wink. "You might want to kill yourself. You'd be doing everyone a big favour – especially yourself."

Tonks fought to control the rising panic in her gut as she looked wildly around the morgue. She had already sealed the door shut – she couldn't exactly explain to the rest of the Aurors why one of the members of the Department of Magical Maintenance was in a coma on the floor, or why a naked, clearly dead young woman had crawled out of the drawer where her body had been conveniently hidden.

"Enervate... enervate! Damn it, why won't he revive? I thought you just Stunned him!"

"I did!" the woman retorted furiously, hurriedly rifling through a drawer and pulling a set of plain black robes, complete with a full cloak and hood – and then tossing them aside. "It was just a Stunning Spell, I swear!"

"Harry, he's barely breathing," Tonks exclaimed, "and we're running out of time – what the – Harry, what are you –"

"You know where the Healers' robes are?" Harry asked distractedly, wrenching open another drawer with a squeal before slamming it shut.

"Keep your voice down!" Tonks hissed, feeling hastily for a pulse. She breathed a little easier when she felt the weak tremor, but she knew that if he didn't get medical attention soon, they'd have a much more serious problem on their hands. "Back cabinet, and I thought we were both going as Aurors!"

"Change of plans, better idea," Harry said quickly, shooting to his feet and ripping open the cabinet with a sigh of relief. "You're going to go as an Auror, I'm going to go as a Healer who was suddenly called to the aide of the injured Italian reporter –"

"What?"

"Who suffered a terrible leg injury when an explosion in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes hit the Ministry," Harry finished, pulling the lime-green robes over his female body and tightening them around his waist. "Convenient detonation for us, particularly considering the Committee of Experimental Charms really ought to be more careful. Thankfully, we'll be on the scene, and we'll have an alibi. Get in, give the reporter the file, and get the hell out before all hell breaks loose. Now come on, we need to get to the far service lift by Mr. Weasley's office –"

"What about Cattermole here?" Tonks demanded.

"I don't know, Tonks, figure something out!" Harry retorted, pulling his hood over his long brown hair and creeping up to the door. Tonks swore under her breath, and with a few muttered words and waves of her wand, she had carefully hidden the unconscious Reg Cattermole inside the Healer robes closet.

But she couldn't help but see that Harry's hands were white-knuckled – and shaking badly. That he was panting very fast, and that his simulacrum's eyes seemed hollowed and haunted...

"Ready?" he whispered, drawing his wand.

Tonks swore again under her breath and pulled her hood up around her hair, which had gone to a short, dull-brown cut. God, Harry, I hope to hell you know what you're doing –

"Let's go."

"Alohomora!"

The corridor was deserted, but neither of them wanted to take any chances, and they reached the lift in seconds, both of them breathing heavily by the time the doors had slid shut behind them. Harry hammered on the button for the fifth floor, muttering under his breath as a few errant memos fluttered around the tiny light.

"We're got a few seconds, so you need an update," Tonks said, not meeting Harry's eyes as she watched the door for any trace of an opening. "Kingsley's here – they've called in every Auror and Hit Wizard they can –"

"Betrayed?" Harry's voice was sharp and raw.

"Don't think so – although Kingsley suspects it. But he's feeling very betrayed right now anyways," Tonks murmured. "He knows something's up with me – we were arguing about it fifteen minutes ago – and Dumbledore gave him new orders, ones he doesn't know how to take."

"What?"

"Level Three – Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes," a cool female voice said in the lift. The door began to slide open, but Harry pressed the close door button, and a second later, the lift began to descend again.

"Dumbledore told Kingsley that he needs to be assigned to Fudge's guard for the announcement in Diagon Alley this morning," Tonks whispered as quickly as she could, keeping herself tensed – at any second, it could happen. "That way, if the goblins or Death Eaters don't interrupt the speech...well, Kingsley's got orders to take Fudge out.

Harry's mouth fell open. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Shacklebolt?"

"Yeah." Tonks made a bitter noise in the back of her throat as she shook her head. "I know why Dumbledore did it – hell, somebody has to – but goddamn it if it didn't make Kingsley's life a living hell –"

"Level Four – Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

The doors got open an inch before Harry's frantic button presses and a short blast of sparks sent them banging shut. Tonks breathed a little easier.

"I only Stunned Cattermole," Harry whispered. Tonks turned, and for a moment could hardly believe how pale the feminine face had become. "I didn't intend to..."

"It happens," Tonks cut him off tersely. "We all give a little too much to spells sometime –"

"No, Tonks," Harry said, a strange note feeling his voice. "It happened when I was fighting Sirius in this body too. Something went wrong with the simula–"

They didn't so much hear the explosion as feel it, and Harry and Tonks both grabbed onto the handrails of the lift as it began to shudder beneath their feet. The light flickered, and Harry couldn't restrain a muffled curse as he momentarily lost his balance.

"That's the first part," he muttered. "Now the –"

BOOM.

They both yelped as the lift dropped a few feet, landing hard against the fifth floor landing with an agonized squeal. The doors sprung open, and they were both already moving towards the nearest desk they could find...

The noise began as a splintering crack, the sound of a snapping beam, and Tonks was reminded horribly of the attack on the Shrieking Shack. But this was worse – much worse.

"Under the desk!" Harry shouted, diving under a massive oaken block just inside the first door, Tonks right behind him. They could smell the dust trickling from the ceiling –

The oaken desk saved their lives. The first piece of stonework only clipped it, but it was still more than enough to send both of them tumbling away...

Meters away from the falling stonework that crushed the oaken desk to kindling, as most of the three stories of the Ministry of Magic above them collapsed.

Scrimgeour threw himself away from the edge, his fingers clawing desperately at the ragged carpet of his office. The fissure that had ripped a gaping hole in the middle of the Ministry of Magic was only growing wider, and he could smell acrid smoke and the stench of burning flesh and paper already –

"I've got you!"

He didn't need another word – he had already seized Amelia Bones' proffered arm and yanked himself to his feet. His wand was drawn a second later.

"What, in the name of fucking magic –"

"Explosion of some sort," Bones shouted, her own wand already slashing through the air, yanking screaming people onto the precarious safety of the crumbling stone edges. The explosion had ripped a gaping, flaming hole through the Department, and with so many of the Hit Wizards and Aurors gathered there...

Forget the casualties, find the attacker, Scrimgeour thought as his rational mind, tempered by decades of training and fighting, took over. Through the flames, he scanned the edges, for anyone remotely suspicious and not falling and screaming –

His gaze snapped on a single figure running desperately along the edge of his floor, white blond hair spilling from the top of his head as he awkwardly scrabbled across the stonework, trying to flee –

He stretched out his wand as white-hot realization pounded in his stomach. "Get Malfoy! Take him alive!"

The few moving Aurors close to Malfoy gave chase – but the floor slanted terribly, and a second later, three more men toppled down into the flames far below. Malfoy himself stumbled, but he caught

himself in time, landing awkwardly – and, Scrimgeour hoped, painfully – on the third floor.

"Somebody get to the lift and stop him!" Scrimgeour roared.

"Lift cables have been cut, sir!" a Hit Wizard shouted from a nearby edge. "Sabotage –"

"Then take the fucking stairs and catch him before he uses our Floos to get out of here!" Scrimgeour yelled, seizing the edge of a desk for support as another tremor shook the Ministry. Chancing a glance down, he saw a haze of secondary blasts sprout like orange flowers along the far side of the fissure near the gutted fourth floor – a fissure that was nearly fifty meters across, and growing with each explosion.

Explosions that were bright purple.

"More attackers!" he shouted. "Take them down, take them down!"

It was unlike any hell that Fred Weasley had seen before in his life.

Fires were exploding everywhere, and he knew that if he stopped moving for even a second, falling masonry would make his life brutally short. He could hear screaming – real, shrill, painful screaming – and although he hadn't seen any bodies yet, he felt bile rising in his throat.

Harry was right – he wasn't ready for this.

Another crash split the air, and Fred hurled himself away from another falling desk, this one fully engaged in flames. He could hear the banging of curses now, and he knew that to people responsible for setting most of the Ministry on fire, he wouldn't get a warm reception.

"Damn it, George, where are you?" he muttered, picking up his pace as he headed over to one of the last casks of goblin explosive. The wick was alight with a prod, and in seconds, he dove behind a filing cabinet as another jet of purple flames rocked the air, filling it with embers and hot smoke.

He heard another shriek, and he tried to ignore it, even though every nerve in his body was screaming for him to find the source, he kept moving. They all needed to be lit – no evidence could remain, he couldn't risk the Ministry finding anything and tracing it to his family –

"Fred!"

His eyes snapped down to the fifth floor – barely visible through the reeking haze of charred paper and sizzling ink – and he could see his twin waving frantically.

And George was not alone.

"Charlie!"

Their older brother looked terrible – his face was wasted and bruised – but he somehow had a wand, held in his single hand. Strangely, the scarred dragon keeper looked strangely at home amongst the raging fires...

"Get down here, Fred, we've got to get out of here!"

"Right," Fred muttered quickly, peering through the smoke for the last few casks of explosive – damned smoke... wait, there they are!

"Incendio! Incendio!"

The bolts scorched through the air, and through the two subsequent explosions, Fred dove towards his brothers, counting on his Quidditch reflexes to save him a disastrous landing –

"Peto terra!"

He felt his body burn warm for a few seconds, but an instant later, he landed relatively softly on the cracking and breaking stone, tumbling as much as he could to lessen his momentum...

"Get down!"

Fred dropped flat as the orange bolt whistled over his head, but before he could respond, Charlie had Stunned the Auror, knocking him into a ruined cubicle.

"We've got to get out of here!" George shouted, his eyes wild as he stumbled over the debris towards his twin. "This place is going to kill us in a few minutes –"

Fred thought fast. "Brooms!" he shouted. "Broom Regulation Control is just below us on Level Six – we blow our way in! Do you have any goblin explosive left –"

"There they are! Stupefy!"

He could hear their screams all around him, but Harry tuned them out. He had to – he had to find one of the reporters. He would know their face, he had memorized as many of their pictures from the Prophet's Foreign Commentary section as he could...

But what was worse was that they weren't just screaming in pain or in terror, as the boulders fell and the fires roared higher and hotter. I'm dressed like a Healer, he thought with growing horror. They're calling for me... they want me to help them...

"There!" Tonks screamed, pointing wildly at one of the few clear corridors ahead. Most of them had collapsed under the weight of the explosions, engulfed in flames, but a few were still mostly intact, albeit exposed to the falling stone several meters above them –

And cowering under a heap of precariously piled debris was a thin man in his nightclothes, with a thin patch of beard on his neck –

Harry recognized him – Paulus Amoccio, a Sicilian reporter who wrote about Quidditch for a living, and likely living through the biggest nightmare of his sheltered life.

"Shield Charms, go!" he shouted, a second later, he could hear Tonks screaming spells as they ran across the corridor towards the man. The spells blocked most of the fire, but it didn't stop the smoke from making him gag, or the sweat from pouring down his back –

"Are you wounded?" he shouted, trying to pull a look of concern onto his face as he drew closer to the cowering man.

Amoccio wildly shook his head, tears leaking fast down his face as hot ashes peppered his hiding place in the inferno.

"Good!" Harry shouted through the noise, as he dove behind the cover where the skinny Sicilian was hiding, pulling out a folder from his robes and shoving it to the man.

"Take everything in that folder, and tell the story!" he shouted, seizing the terrified reporter by the shoulders for good measure. "Add this in for good measure – the world needs to know the truth!"

"I can't keep this up for much longer!" Tonks shrieked as she joined them behind cover, as a shuddering crash split the air. A boulder the size of a hippogriff struck Tonks' Shield Charm, and it was only a desperate dive that had saved her from being crushed.

"B-but..."

"But what?" Harry roared, rounding on the reporter, who blanched.

"H-how do I know this is true? W-what is the proof?" Amoccio babbled. "I-I... this could all b-be some sort of –"

Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing. After everything he'd gone through to get this fucking far, the man didn't even believe him? What the FUCK?

But they'd believe Harry Potter.

Tonks shuddered violently, and Harry suddenly realized what the quick-thinking Auror had chosen to do. It was risky – no, it was insane – but they had no choice.

"The Polyjuice is wearing off!" he shouted, filling his voice with panic as Tonks continued to change. Her hair went jet black. Her eyes went emerald green. Any trace of her femininity vanished.

And a lightning-bolt scar appeared on her forehead.

Amoccio's mouth fell open, momentarily forgetting the danger at the sight of Harry Potter.

"Now do you believe us?" Harry screamed, the smoke making him nearly double over in pain as he gasped for clean air...

"Y-Yes, yes!" Amoccio stammered.

"Then stay under cover and don't get yourself killed!" Tonks shouted.
"And don't lose those papers – they tell my story!"

"I won't, I won't –"

Neither of the two were listening anymore – they were already running, racing towards the stairwell they prayed was still open and free from debris –

Straight into a squad of Hit Wizards – with Rufus Scrimgeour in the lead.

Time seemed to stop. Harry saw the look of horrified recognition cross Scrimgeour's face as his gaze fixed on Tonks – disguised as Harry Potter. The look of recognition replaced an instant later by a look of betrayal – and raw, unmitigated fury.

The order wasn't even given – Scrimgeour threw the first curse.

And then it was a blaze of colour, and fire, as Harry's wand snapped up, and he shouted the first spell that came to his mind.

"Expelliarmus!"

There was a blast of light from Harry's wand, and he felt it vibrate in his hand as the nearest Hit Wizard howled. But not with rage – with pain.

He felt something hot and warm splash on his face, as he seized the wand out of the air, letting the arm fall with a sodden, sizzling plop to the hot stone floor –

The arm?

"Oh fuck!"

The Hit Wizards were shouting, but Harry wasn't stopping. Shoving the other wand into his wand hand, he began casting spell after spell – and every single one of them worked to ghastly, horrifying effect.

A Disarming Charm took the arm off at the shoulder. A Stunning Spell drove his target into unconsciousness that her comrades couldn't break. A Reductor Curse reduced a man to a bloody, screaming torso and head. A Jelly-Legs Jinx, cast in a hasty moment, caused a hooded Aurors legs to dissolve into fleshy, viscous ooze.

A Flaming Lash Curse nearly ripped four Hit Wizards in half.

The wands in his hand shook violently with every curse, and the terror that they were going to explode in his hands rushed through his body. But he didn't dare stop – he couldn't, he needed to keep attacking, drive his enemies back –

-they're all your enemies –

-NO, THIS IS WRONG –

- set them aflame, let the fuckers burn –

- YOU'RE KILLING ALLIES –

- all enemies, you knew they were going to turn on you, bring all the treacherous scum to their knees, they never believed the truth from the beginning and now they'll pay for their ignorance –

- NO!

"GELUMORSIS!"

The black rush of cold exploding out of his wand was a cyclone, and the embers died in midair as the cold seized and froze the blood in their lungs and heads, making them rupture violently, explosively –

The ground wrenched beneath his feet, and he felt himself flying into the air, the spare wand torn from his hands as he crashed heavily against a flaming desk. He rolled away from the fire, but he could feel it eating hungrily at his robes...

"Brooms!"

Harry's eyes snapped up, and shaking his simulacrum's long hair away from his face, he saw three brooms soar upward out of the newly blasted hole in the floor –

And then he saw Tonks, wearing his appearance only a few meters. He saw her wand blasted from her hands by Scrimgeour's hex, and the words for the second spell already on the scarred Auror's lips to strike her down –

White-hot fury surged through Harry's body, like he had never felt before. It possessed him, drove him to his feet, his eyes blazing silver in their sockets. He wasn't going to lose her. Not Tonks, not like this, not while she's wearing my face! She's not dying for my crimes, my treason –

"AVADA KED-"

Something hit him – he didn't know what, but he stumbled, his wand jerking up –

"-AVRA!"

There was a flash of white-green light, and Harry felt fire in his hand, and the rushing sound filled the entire fissure –

And then the light faded, and he could see someone falling, toppling like a broken rag doll through the smoke and embers, and he knew, in a moment, that he had done something horribly wrong.

The figure had a single arm.

Oh god... oh my god... no...

In that second, Fred and George knew.

Both of them knew they didn't dare stop. They landed on the second floor, charging across the ledge. Their spells were fast, hard, brutal and often explosive, and the Hit Wizards scrambled to counterattack. But the twins weren't going to fight. With a handful of Floo powder in each hand, they dove into the fire, screaming as tears coursed down their faces.

They didn't care that their spells had broken three necks, two collarbones, and shattered a pelvis. They didn't care one of their spells had set four people on fire.

Their innocence and restraint had died with their brother.

And the bells began to ring.

He didn't know what they meant – he couldn't know, he didn't want to know – but he could see a hooded figure in black erupt into thin air, leaping down across the fissure through the smoke, his hooked nose visible even through the inferno –

Scrimgeour screamed curses, but Snape blocked every one of them, his eyes icy and stark against the flames around him. Harry wanted to cry out something – anything – but he couldn't. He could see more corpses falling, but Snape wasn't paying attention to them – his eyes were fixed on Tonks – who looked exactly like Harry.

In a second, Harry realized what Snape was trying to do, and he recognized the empty potion vial in his hand for what it was. Tonks knew it too, but Snape ignored her screamed warning as he seized her and slammed the flask into her chest

There was an echoing bang, and the two vanished, as the Portkey sucked them away.

Scrimgeour and Harry both screamed wordless cries of rage, but it was for nothing – it was all for nothing.

"Accio broom!"

Scrimgeour's eyes landed on Harry, but it was already too late, he had already soared into the air, flying up to the second floor –

He wrenched the broom a hard right angle downwards, pulling out of his climb and streaking towards one of the few remaining fireplaces still intact. The curses and hexes screamed around him, but he didn't care – he only had one target.

He knew his timing would have to be exact, and that what he was doing was suicidal, but he had stopped caring about that a long time ago. He let go of his broom with both hands, gripping with his legs as he streaked towards the flaming grate –

Then he let go with his legs

The broom flew into the fire. Harry's hand closed around the ripped bag of Floo powder before he rolled headlong into the flames –

He felt his hand shatter as it hit the stone mantle, but the Floo powder lit the fire green.

"Hogwarts!"

And then his head cracked slammed against the back of the fireplace, and everything went black.

"Get out of my way, newly reinstated Daily Prophet Special Correspondant coming through – oh, for Merlin's sake –"

"Sorry, Ms. Skeeter," the grim-faced Auror said with a scowl, the unsightly scar winding across his nose and side of his face twisting, "no preliminary meetings with the Minister, and no special interviews. He's got a big day today."

"But I can see an area specifically cordoned off for the press –"
"International press only, ma'am. I'm under orders."

Rita Skeeter felt like screaming. She had finally found a way to insinuate herself back into the Daily Prophet's hierarchy – Cuffe had been extraordinarily cooperative when he had arrived back at the office at four in the morning, sweating and shaking. And now she was going to lose it all without an exclusive interview with Fudge.

She masked her mounting rage with a smile she knew to be sickly sweet. "Then perhaps, Auror..."

"Wilson," the Auror replied stiffly, his voice surprisingly audible over the clamour around her, as a dozen other reporters around her jockeyed for position. "Rogan Wilson."

"Perhaps, Auror Wilson, you could provide me a short preview about what is to come in this little presentation?" Rita asked slyly, putting her hand on his left arm. "Something to do with the new building over there –"

"I'm not eligible to give you any sort of information," Wilson said uncomfortably, jerking away from her touch quickly. "As I said, the Minister will deliver his message to the –"

His voice was cut off by another wizard – this one a Hit Wizard, Rita suspected – cupping his hand to Wilson's ear and whispering something very quickly. She strained her ears, but the sudden pallor of Wilson's face said more than enough – something was wrong.

He turned quickly to the other wizard. "Does the Minister –"

"Not yet, we'll inform him after the presentation –"

"That's in two minutes, he's got to know!" Wilson exclaimed. "Get me something to Shacklebolt, Tonks, anybody right now, we need to declare –"

"Declare what?" Rita asked eagerly. "What's going on, what went wrong? Wilson, do you have a statement –"

"Not now!" Wilson snapped, shoving her back rudely. Rita stumbled back, but thanks to the thick crowd and the assistance of her beefy photographer, it was fairly easy for her to regain her footing and regain her thoughts – despite her frustrations, she knew it was time for a new plan.

"Bozo, stay down here," she ordered her photographer. "Get clean shots of the Minister and anyone else interesting. I'm going –"

She spun on her heels, ignored the tight pressing sensation around her, and a second later, she was standing in a tightly packed balcony four stories above the crowd. The old warlocks around her groaned and shouted as she shoved her way to the edge, but she didn't care. They were irrelevant anyways.

Her eyes focused on the low stage, set only a few feet off the ground in front of the new building, a granite behemoth matching Gringotts in height, if not in grandeur. The purple stage spanned the entire alley, doing an admirable job of blocking traffic and creating a large crowd in front and behind it. A thick line of Aurors and Hit Wizards surrounded the stage, and she could already see the repulsive form of Dolores Umbridge scurrying around the podium, making sure all the charms were in place. Rita's lip curled – the woman was wearing blood-red robes. She looks like more of a tumour than she already is...

Umbridge put her wand to her throat. "Hem hem."

The sound was amplified twenty-fold, and Rita winced as she carefully set her Quick-Quotes quill on the parchment after sucking on it eagerly. It would be any second now...

"Witches and wizards and all magical creatures," Umbridge began, her breathy voice filled with triumph, "I give you Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge!"

There was a storm of clapping and a few hoots, but Rita caught the chorus of groans springing up from the warlocks around her. Interesting... if any of them have any clout, this could be a very interesting day indeed...

She quickly focused on the Minister, who had stepped out of the new building, a wide smile on his face as he waved his lime-green bowler hat to the crowd. Stepping to the rotating podium – the crowd had spread on both sides of the stage, Rita noted – Fudge pressed his wand to his throat.

"People of wizarding England," he began clearly, with a rehearsed quality, "I have been your Minister for several years, and throughout all of my time as Minister for Magic, I have striven to uphold the highest standards of excellence and quality within our Departments."

Rita could hardly withstand a snort, and she wasn't alone. Several of the old warlocks around her were shaking their heads with disgust.

"This has led to some controversy, but evidence cannot be refuted," Fudge continued, a smile creeping onto his face. "During my term, I have brought both the Quidditch World Cup and the famous Triwizard Tournament to England, which have both been incredible success stories."

There was applause at this, some of it begrudging, but Rita ignored it. Her eyes were on Fudge, who was starting to speak a little more quickly. It was a sign, and she knew it: this was big.

"The eye of the international magical community is fixed upon our nation," Fudge said, raising a finger, "particularly with the resignation of Albus Dumbledore from the International Confederation of Wizards and the appointment of Nathan Cassane to that role. We are the hub of the hub of this community, and any changes within our environment reflect upon the world –"

She saw the movement before even Fudge did, and her eyes narrowed as a cloaked figure stepped onto the stage, approaching from Fudge's side. Umbridge began to shout something, but the figure – wearing the obvious garb of an Auror – put his hand next to Fudge's ear and began to whisper as the rotating platform ground to a halt.

The crowd held bated breath, and even the air felt stiff as Rita tugged on the collar of her robes absentmindedly. Too damned hot for this time of the morning, and it's starting to smell...

Fudge suddenly turned to the wizard and began whispering back to him. Rita frowned: this was new. What was so important that the Auror had to interrupt Fudge in the middle of his speech – and make Fudge turn as pale as a clean white sheet?

The Auror stepped away quickly, moving back into the line, and Umbridge looked murderous as she glared daggers at the figure, but Rita focused on Fudge. Something was wrong with the Minister, that she could tell. His bowler had become a lime-green blur in his hands as it spun between his fingers, and she thought she could see a shininess on the man's face that looked like sweat –

"R-Reflect upon the world, like ripples in a pond," Fudge said quickly, trying to make up for his lapse in poise. "Every new action, every proposal of change that we proclaim sets a precedent, and thus we must examine them in detail –"

"Sets some kind of precedent all right," a warlock behind her said with a grunt. "At least Bagnold had a sense of just conduct..."

Rita Skeeter turned towards the warlock to hiss at him to shut up, but her eyes caught something else, because outside of the packed balcony, she could see two figures appear inside the building. Both were wearing black, and had black hair, but Rita Skeeter knew the man's hooked nose and sallow complexion anywhere.

The other figure was Harry Potter.

Her quill leapt to her hand as she began shoving her way back towards the doors inside as her thoughts exploded into turmoil. What was Harry Potter doing, outside of Hogwarts and Dumbledore's protection, with Snape no less –

And then she saw something that nearly made her drop everything in her hands.

Harry Potter had just turned and slapped Snape clean across the face. Even through the deafening noise of Fudge's voice, she could hear the tinny scream –

"YOU IDIOT! YOU GOT THE WRONG –"

"And so," Fudge trumpeted, and Rita turned back hastily, as she began pushing her way to the front again, "I give to you the newest instrument of economic and social change delivered to our world in a century, an institution that will redefine our generation and prepare us for a new, shining, financially successful future! I give you..."

Suddenly, the spell cut out. Fudge frowned, and tapped his throat again, restoring the magic, but Rita was already looking frantically back towards the building, hoping to catch another glimpse of Potter and Snape. She couldn't see anything –

"I give you the –"

The spell cut out again. Rita swore with exasperation, even as the Quick-Quotes quill in her hand awkwardly translated the curse into something more politically correct. Something was definitely up, too many things were happening.

And then she heard the whistle.

It began as a tinny shrill sound, hardly splitting the air, but it grew louder and louder with every second. She winced and rammed her hand against her ear, but the noise only grew louder and louder. The Quick-Quotes Quill was not scrawling words as much as a sound across the page, a long line of incomprehensible vowels –

But where is it coming from –?

And then she saw it streak across the Alley – it had been launched, no, fired from the very end of the road, burning and twirling through the air, moving quickly enough to be impossible to hit, yet lazily enough to be implacable... and then the whistle grew louder and louder, as another projectile spiralled down the alley, flying faster and faster as they gyrated towards the target. Time seemed to slow as Rita felt drawn with horrified fascination, even as the sane part of her brain screamed danger at her -

Fudge's eyes widened the second he looked up to see the strange flaming projectiles twirling in the air above him, only a few feet across and borne on flames of unfamiliar magic. There was a long second of shrill whistle that the artist in Rita knew should be silence in any Muggle show.

Then Fudge dove for cover, as both projectiles inflated to double their size and slammed into the new building, detonating instantly.

The twin explosions blinded Rita for a second, but the plumes of red smoke soaring into the sky drew her gaze as more explosions shook the precariously tall building, the business-like architecture shattering as more blasts exploded within –

Rita's fevered mind told her to look away, to dive for cover, but she couldn't. There was something mesmerizing about the attack as the building continued to crumple and blacken, teetering upon supports that she knew were shattering beneath it... she didn't even hear the screams erupting across the crowd below...

All the enchantments on the building were collapsing, and Rita knew it was only a precious second, but the thought was suddenly clear as crystal across her mind, and she could move, so paralyzing was the revelation. Every bit of evidence, everything suddenly seemed to make sense.

Fudge was warned... and he didn't listen.

She was blown off her feet a second later, as the third – and largest explosion in five months – rocked Diagon Alley.

"My lord?"

Voldemort did not turn from his book – he knew who was speaking, and from the acrid stench of fear in the room, he wasn't expecting good news. He set down his wand; this would only take a moment.

"Make this quick, Lucius."

"There was a... complication with the Gringotts transfer," Lucius Malfoy said with a slight cough. "We managed to retrieve and move the necessary funds, but –"

"The goblins found out, didn't they?"

He could hear Lucius shift behind him, and for a second, he allowed himself to relish the scent of the elder Malfoy's fear. "Eleven goblins died – and they retaliated."

"I already received a message from you regarding the attack upon the bank," Voldemort said coolly, tapping a charred scrap of paper with a long finger as he slowly turned to face his Death Eater. "It is a setback laden with opportunities to divide the Ministry –"

"The bank wasn't the only place that was attacked," Lucius blurted.

Voldemort's red eyes narrowed and darkened, and the first traces of anger crept into his voice. He had neutralized Dumbledore – who else had gotten involved? "Speak."

"Kemester found out about the goblin deaths," Lucius said quickly, his eyes darting around the tiny room that Voldemort was using for his study, deep in the depths of Malfoy Manor. "He attacked me, and when I came to, the entire Ministry was coming apart around my ears – someone had set off an explosive –"

"How much damage?"

"Multiple stories of the Ministry have been destroyed – the blast was huge –"

Voldemort's hand was slowly curling into a fist with realization. "So Cassane has made his choice –"

"My Lord, I didn't even see Cassane," Lucius interrupted, his forehead gleaming with sweat that he hastily wiped away. "I saw Potter –"

Voldemort paused for a few seconds as his mind digested the new information. "Then either Cassane is working with Potter, there is a third party, or Potter has become a more formidable enemy than even I had planned."

"My lord, I –"

"This changes things," Voldemort said, more to himself than to Malfoy as he turned back to his books. With a wave, the books had been shrunk and placed in a secret pocket in his robes. "An interesting indication, and one that cannot be ignored. Potter is indeed progressing – indeed, he may have become an instigator."

He picked up his wand and turned to face Lucius. "You and Narcissa would be wise to pack your things. Malfoy Manor will not remain standing much longer."

The colour drained from Lucius' face. "What?"

"If Potter has access to that type of firepower, or intimate contact with Cassane, he will use that power again," Voldemort said crisply, sweeping past Malfoy as he ascended the narrow staircase. It was extremely dark on the narrow, railing-less shaft, but Voldemort was not troubled. He could hear Malfoy scrambling behind him, sputtering protestations.

"But what does that –"

"Because you were not discreet, you were identified." The door at the top of the shaft flew open at Voldemort's touch, and he stepped

across the marble floors of Malfoy Manor for the last time. "He'll be coming for you – and your son. But Draco's problems are not your own, Lucius."

"I... I can't just abandon –"

"But don't worry, Lucius," Voldemort continued, his eyes rising to a beautiful crystal chandelier hanging above him with cold perfection. "Everything is moving into place. Dumbledore is out of my way for the time being, the Ministry and the goblins are at each other's throats, and my men are poised to strike from every angle." He laughed, and through a nearby mirror, he could see Malfoy wince at the sound. "A shame to lose this place, but that is the price you pay for carelessness, Lucius. And I never considered that the old saying Charlus Potter bandied about had any meaning, but even Lord Voldemort can be pleasantly surprised."

Lucius' face was ashen, and his eyes were pleading, but Voldemort paid them no mind as he approached the massive doors, leading into the gardens. His mind was racing, his plans within plans adjusting to suit the new circumstances. It may require more time, but I have waited fourteen years – I can wait a little more.

"W-What was the saying, my Lord?"

"Simple, elegant, and until today, utterly incorrect." Voldemort replied with a lipless grin. "'Hell hath no fury like a Potter scorned.' You've tasted his anger before, Lucius. Now your home will taste his rage."

It was two nights after the attack on Diagon Alley and the Ministry, but Scrimgeour already knew they were meeting far too late.

The four men and two women sitting around the small conference table were arguably the most powerful Ministry authorities and insiders in England – except for one conspicuous absence. The empty chair at the end of the table was almost ominous in its silence.

A silence Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge broke after a long minute by nasally clearing his throat.

"Do we have a... a status report?"

"Beyond the obvious?" Scrimgeour snapped. "The Ministry has been gutted, and so has the new bank that I conspicuously was not aware of until today."

"And given the nature of your announcements, Minister, our Department should have been notified about the possibility of reprisals," Amelia Bones added through gritted teeth. "Why weren't we told, Cornelius?"

"This was to be kept entirely as a political matter," Fudge replied stiffly, with a nod to the two men sitting at the opposite ends of the table. Scrimgeour regarded both men with absolute distaste. The one closest to him was Kirtan Emerson, a high ranking Wizengamot member and the Head of the Department of International Law, and while he was strikingly handsome, there was an unstable glint to his eyes that many women found mesmerizing. Scrimgeour found it repulsive.

The man sitting next to him wasn't much better – an older, balding man by the name of Peter O'Sanden. He was a Scot, but possessed little of the fiery personality the region was famous for. Indeed, he was in fact one of the most even-tempered and bland individuals that Scrimgeour knew. It was these two traits, combined with startling intelligence that had led him to become the head of the Department of Magical Finance and the interim head of the Department of Magical Co-operation, since Crouch's death. Scrimgeour normally tolerated O'Sanden, but from the look on the Scot's face, the Auror knew that the other man had been keeping dangerous secrets from him.

"I did not predict that the goblins would take offense –"

"Cornelius, you knew they were going to be furious with this!" Scrimgeour snarled. "Don't even feign ignorance, you're not stupid enough to –"

Fudge shot to his feet. "That is an outrageous –"

"Hem hem."

Scrimgeour's anger didn't abate as he turned to where Umbridge was sitting, a maddeningly content expression on her face. "Yes, Dolores?"

"This issue, with the goblins, Rufus, if I remember correctly, was actually brought to the attentions of your Department," Umbridge replied, the sickeningly sweet note in her voice ringing with every word. "I clearly recall one of your Hit Wizards being informed about the attack several hours ahead of time."

Bones went scarlet. "What are you implying, Dolores?"

"I'm not implying anything," Umbridge replied innocently. "I'm just mentioning that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was already in possession of information that could have been beneficial to preventing these attacks –"

Scrimgeour could feel his pulse pounding in his temples, and he fought to control his rage. It had been a long time since he had felt this angry at anyone, but this pustule of a woman, by placing blame upon his men...

"Who was the Hit Wizard?" Bones asked suddenly. "I'm sure you have a name for me, Dolores, and not just making wild accusations."

"Certainly, it was Dmitri Kemester," Umbridge replied promptly, with another sweet smile.

Scrimgeour felt the urge to swear vehemently, but he forced it back. A second later, he realized he shouldn't have bothered – Bones had just cursed badly enough to cause Fudge to squawk in protest.

"Now, really, Amelia, there isn't a need for such language! If we simply get Kemester in –"

"He's off the active duty roster," Bones growled. "He wasn't ready, not nearly recovered enough from his injuries, and I had the forms filled out for him to be sent to St. Mungo's for some long overdue

psychological evaluation. I have no idea where he is. Where did you see him, Umbridge?"

"At the Ministry, before the attack," Umbridge replied innocently. "He was rambling on about how the goblins were undoubtedly going to retaliate and that he had to warn the Minister. Naturally, I took his concerns to light and managed to arrange a hasty evacuation..."

"Finding Kemester, while important to uncovering the identities of those who knew about the possibility of this attack, is not the sole priority," Fudge began unsteadily, pulling a paper from his file very slowly. "I have here documentation from the managing partners of the bank –"

"Of course you do," Scrimgeour muttered inaudibly.

" – And they are planning on rebuilding, but they desire the full support of the Ministry with their efforts, and a reassurance that the goblins will not attack again."

"Who are those managing partners?" Bones asked suspiciously, snatching the paper from Fudge's sweaty hands and ignoring the indignant noises from Umbridge, Emerson, and O'Sanden. "We have all their signatures here... Lucius Malfoy, Willard Parkinson, Vesperian Welmon, Barnabus Cuffe, Peter –"

"That's quite enough!" Emerson snapped, yanking the paper from Bones' hands. "I will not have you jeopardize my clients by implying culpability!"

Scrimgeour knew in that second the secret O'Sanden had been keeping. "Wish you would have told me, Peter, that you were on this team," he growled, slowly rising to his feet, knowing that he was terrifying O'Sanden as his golden eyes blazed with righteous fury. "Maybe that's the reason why you did such an excellent job diverting my investigations in the Department of Magical Finance, or preventing me from interrogating Fleur Delacour, who was fresh from Gringotts and in your department!"

"W-We don't even have any evidence she could have been involved –"

"Well, now I'll never know, because she's GONE!" Scrimgeour roared, slamming his fist on the table. His patience was spent, but he didn't care – not now, with his department in shambles, his men dead and dying, and betrayal looming on every side. First Dumbledore's unreliability –where the hell is he now, anyways – then Potter's betrayal and involvement in the Ministry bombing, something I'll handle personally... and now this. "We could have saved a lot of innocent lives, if I had known this was going to happen, and then to hear that you all knew about this before Amelia and I did... this is a scandal of national proportions, and I will not stand for it."

"Rufus, calm down!" Amelia exclaimed, grabbing the Auror's shoulder and yanking him back into his seat. "This solves nothing!"

"Agreed," Emerson growled, his handsome face twisted in a scowl. "We've got a crisis on our hands on several levels. The wizarding world is in a panic. The international journalists are scrambling for information that we can't even give them, which will lead them to poke further. The Prophet is not helping either – the last thing we need is a bitch like Skeeter getting involved in this. And to top it off, we still don't have our statement from Gringotts, with the goblins' terms."

"They're biding their time, the filthy wretches," Umbridge hissed. "They like watching our world in chaos –"

"We can only be thankful that Dumbledore hasn't chosen these moments to make his move," Fudge added.

There was silence for a long few seconds, and then –

"Why?"

"Why what?" Umbridge asked with a scowl.

"Why hasn't Dumbledore done anything?" Scrimgeour asked, looking around the table as he rose to his feet again. "He's one of the best

mediators in our world, he's an extraordinarily powerful wizard, and if anything, we would be in his debt if he chose to help us. And with Cassane vanished," he added, throwing a glare at the empty chair at the table, "Dumbledore would be the one wizard who could assume control and impose order just on strength of will alone – so why hasn't he? It doesn't fit."

"Perhaps he is in hiding, having engineered the blast in the Ministry or collaborated with the goblins," Emerson suggested.

"It doesn't fit, Dumbledore would never have endorsed this sort of attack," Bones muttered, pulling a scrap of parchment from her suitcase and scribbling furiously.

"Dumbledore is irrelevant right now," Fudge interrupted, spreading his hands upon the table. "He'll become relevant when he reappears and begins to interfere in our business, which is already complicated enough as it is. What is relevant is our next plans. I'm placing both of my announcements on hold until we rebuild the Ministry and the new bank, after coming to an agreement with the goblins. I will not suffer any more attacks, and part of that will involve identifying the culprits."

"There's already a warrant for the arrest of the Weasley twins and the werewolf Lupin," Emerson said promptly. "I can draw up the necessary subpoenas when you convene the Wizengamot –"

"I'll contact the Prophet with a press release," Umbridge said eagerly.

"Don't bother," Fudge said, a small smile creeping onto his face. "The reporters will do a better job tracking down information and culprits on their own; they're certainly being paid well enough. Skeeter will have to be silenced – that'll be the second subpoena you issue, Emerson, right after the one to get Cassane here – but other than that, the journalists may help us uncover the truth behind this."

"And the bank partners?" Scrimgeour growled through gritted teeth. "The ones who should be held accountable for this fiasco?"

"That's where the goblins come in," O'Sanden said, raising a finger. "If we can identify the partner responsible for the obvious mismanagement that led to the goblin attacks –"

"Attack."

"Excuse me?"

"Attack in the singular," Scrimgeour said tersely, tapping his finger on the table as he began to pace around the darkened room. It was larger than it needed to be, but Scrimgeour guessed there were normally a lot more people using it. "The goblins weren't responsible for the attack on the Ministry – there may have been goblin explosives used, but that was gratuitous destruction. That's not their tactic."

"You have information supporting this?" Fudge asked quickly.

Scrimgeour exchanged a glance with Bones, who responded with the tiniest nod, hardly even a motion.

"Yes."

"Then you work with the reporters and find our culprits," Fudge ordered. "Amelia, mobilize the Hit Wizards and have them prepared for any more goblin action –"

"Already done," Bones said crisply. "Now all we need is the Goblin Liaison Office to contact Gringotts and –"

"Begging your pardon, Madam Bones, but this will need to go through our Departments," O'Sanden said brusquely. "Mine and Mr. Emerson's – the goblins have long viewed the Goblin Liaison Office as less of an embassy and more of a 'puppet position'. Dealings with Gringotts should go through us."

Scrimgeour could hardly restrain a snort – the cynical poet in his mind could see the sordid irony in allowing one of the partners of the attacked bank to negotiate with the goblins - as he reached one of the few windows in the room. Looking out, he could see the darkened city

of London around him. Fiddling with the rusted catch, he shoved the window open –

And not a second too soon, for a horned owl soared into the room. Scrimgeour didn't immediately identify the bird, but he did recognize the official, red-sealed envelope in the owl's talons – an envelope that Fudge cautiously took and slit open.

There was silence as the Minister read the note, and Scrimgeour watched the colour drain from his face.

"So?" Bones asked after a few seconds. "'What does Gringotts have to say?'"

"It is a message from Welmon," Fudge said after a few seconds, setting the note aside with trembling hands. "He's being held hostage. 'The goblin nation would like us to be made aware that the Ministry of Magic has been barred from the usage of any wizarding currency. According to goblin philosophy, since they were the ones that minted the gold, it ultimately still belongs to them, and thus they are revoking our right to it.'"

O'Sanden went white, and Umbridge hissed a curse, but Scrimgeour ignored them both as he returned to the table. He moved behind Cassane's empty chair – which was facing Fudge – and leaned over the table, fixing the Minister with his most intense stare.

"What else does the message say?"

Fudge coughed slightly. "'If their initial conditions are not met, I' – meaning Welmon – 'will be executed and another attack will be launched against the wizarding world.'"

"What's the other 'initial' condition?" Scrimgeour pursued, his gold eyes glittering like a cat about to pounce.

Fudge swallowed hard. "The severed heads of the Malfoy family."

Lupin shook his head wearily as he rubbed his eyes and leaned against a cast-iron fence, the drizzle cutting through the tangled mess

that was his hair and stubble. He felt terrible and looked worse, but he was triumphant. He had finally succeeded – his pursuer was gone.

Seven days... it had taken him seven days of running and hiding to finally evade the Hit Wizard. He knew what he was doing, that one, he thought as he walked towards the nearest park bench. Couldn't stand still long enough to get the Tracking Charm off, chasing me all over London, and he was good enough to track me the second I used a Portkey or Apparated... and now I think I've finally lost him under the cover of this mess...

He stretched his shoulders, and winced at the popping noise as his joints creaked. The wave of exhaustion was coming, and he knew it. For a moment, he considered simply sleeping on the bench – Peckham wasn't a nice part of London in any case, and he suspected he'd go unnoticed – but he knew he had to keep moving.

"Grimmauld's obviously out," he muttered to himself as he staggered along the path, the puddles leaking into his torn shoes as he stumbled along the sidewalk. "And if Greyback knows I'm a spy, I can't go back to the warrens... I just go home..."

Home. The very word brought a massive rush of longing to Lupin. His parents were long dead, and he didn't have any siblings, but he knew there was one sanctum that only he and Sirius knew about. It was the wild country, and he would be alone, but it would be worth it. For a few days at least, he thought to himself, rubbing his eyes again. A few men shouted curses and slurs at him – he wasn't surprised, he looked like a vagrant – but he ignored them, focusing instead on his isolated hideaway...

He heard a car backfire, and he Disapparated at that moment.

A second later, he was standing in the untamed wilderness, panting as he tried to adjust to the feeling of Apparition. But despite his aching head and utter exhaustion, he couldn't help but feel at peace.

The forest was rampant, untamed and away from the city, he could hear the sounds of wildlife. He knew there wasn't any magical creatures here – maybe a few Muggle campers closer to the highway,

but none this deep into the brush. His cabin was hidden in a small clearing – a tiny, two room affair that was ramshackle, yet comfortable. He could see some clouds above him, but the rain had stopped, leaving everything with the fresh, moist smell of natural growth. Lupin couldn't help himself – for a few moments, he simply stood still in the forest, taking in the beauty of the cold and crisp night breeze and the stars above him, not blotted out by the city glare...

This was the right choice for me, Lupin thought through the haze of his mind as he carefully slid through the bramble patches towards his door. Even the name of this forest – Hope Woodlands... it brings back old memories... times of peace...

His hand rested on the doorknob... and he froze.

The door was already open – and from the sounds of it, someone was already inside, and had lit a fire.

His wand was drawn in a second, as unthinking rage surged through him. How dare they defile his paradise like this? He shoved the door open, a curse upon his lips –

Tonks looked up from where she had hung the kettle over the fireplace and sighed. "Bout time you showed up, Remus."

Lupin didn't lower his wand – he had nearly been trapped before in the last few days – but as he stepped closer, he knew that this wasn't a ruse. Tonks looked terrible – the bubblegum pink in her hair was badly streaked with black, and she looked more tired than he felt - and the look of ashen resignation and fear on her face was impossible to fake.

"How did you find this place?" he asked instead, pulling off his tattered cloak and hanging it on a rusty iron hook next to the door.

"Sirius suggested it when we were looking for places to hide if Harry had to run," Tonks murmured, poking at the fire absently. "And we would have come here too, if we could have trusted you a few months ago."

Lupin paused from peeling off his shredded shoes. "Does that mean... does that mean you trust me now?"

"Too much has happened, Remus, for it to be that easy," Tonks replied, finally meeting the werewolf's eyes. Lupin was struck, once again, by how bad she looked. "And not just between you and us... things have changed, and I didn't know where else to go."

"How long have you been –"

"Six days," Tonks said wearily. "After Snape screwed up and rescued me instead of Harry from the attack on the Ministry –"

"Wait a second, you were there too?" Lupin interrupted, a feeling of horror rising in his gut. "And so was Harry?"

"Yeah, but that's not important. Well, after Snape fucked up and 'rescued' me, we ended up in Diagon Alley – where we saw the goblins attack." She shivered. "It was like the Ministry attack all over again, Remus. Flames everywhere, people screaming and running, nobody knowing what to do –"

"I missed most of the attack," Remus replied, hesitantly putting his hand on Tonks' shoulder, "but I heard about what happened. I was in the Atrium before the bomb went off – that strange Cassane fellow sprung me in the nick of time, and I managed to get to the Floo before getting spotted by a patrol. They nailed me with a Tracking Charm that I could cut loose, and I've been trying to find a place to hide after getting rid of it. Wasn't going to come earlier – wasn't going to bring the Ministry here."

Tonks was quiet for a few seconds, and then, after taking a long, shuddering breath, she spoke again. "During the confusion, Snape and I took shelter in Dumbledore's little basement hideout in Diagon Alley, and after giving me the usual caustic treatment, he bolted. No idea where he is, or where Dumbledore is. He contacted you?"

Lupin shook his head. "It's strange, you'd think Dumbledore would have said or done something by now."

"It's like what Harry was saying," Tonks muttered. "We were relying on the old man too much... and now he's gone. Voldemort's got a clear field."

"What was Harry doing in... no, I understand if you don't want to tell me, but do you know where he is now?" Lupin asked anxiously. "I... I want to know –"

"Hogwarts, I'm guessing," Tonks said bitterly, viciously jabbing the fire with the poker as the kettle began to whistle. She cooled it with a blast of chill air from her wand as she poured the tea into a small plastic mug. Lupin remembered that mug – James had gotten it for him when they were in their seventh year...

"In any case, I can't go to him. Snape told me there's some sort of strange magical conjunction of some sort that distorts time or something. And with the ghosts acting as crazy as they are, it's probably safer..."

Lupin snapped up. "That's new. But I thought... you and Harry, that you two were –"

"Thought we were what, Remus?" Tonks asked sharply.

Lupin flushed and busied himself with a mug of his own tea. "Nothing, just something Moody said..."

"What did Mad-Eye say?" Tonks asked dangerously. "I know he was my mentor, but that still doesn't mean –"

"He – and I, really – well..." Lupin struggled to say the words even as Tonks was steadily getting redder. "We thought you and Harry were... you know..."

"Lovers?"

Lupin looked away, but Tonks got the message. She swore under her breath.

"Well..."

"Well what?" Tonks snapped, slamming her mug of tea down on the table. A few scalding droplets landed on her hand, and she swatted them away with another curse.

"Are you?"

"Remus, if I knew what was going on between me and Harry, don't you think I'd, you'd know, actually try and be with him right now, or be back with the Ministry maintaining my blown cover? Kingsley's already sent a Patronus after me – he's told Scrimgeour that I'm holidaying in Spain, but Scrimgeour undoubtedly knows that's bullshit... Merlin, as if my life could be any more fucked up right now –"

"Tonks, if you're with Harry," Lupin began cautiously, "there's nothing wrong with just saying –"

"Yes, there is!" Tonks exclaimed, slamming her chair back and snapping to her feet. "I don't know what's happening to me, but for fuck's sake, I'm seven years older than him! I shouldn't be feeling anything towards Harry besides friendship, considering some of the things he's said and done... but whenever I'm around him, t-things start to change. I support what he's doing without considering how horrible the plan might be. I flirt effortlessly, and he reciprocates in kind. And the night we finally rescued Sirius – oh, yeah, forgot to mention that, to free Sirius from the ghost of what looked to be fucking Cygnus Black possessing him, we had to practically kill him – Harry and I... we..."

She swallowed hard as she stormed towards the only window Lupin had in the sitting room and stared out at the naked wilderness. Lupin didn't rise with her, but he could see the track of a tear tracing down her cheek.

"I don't know why I feel this way towards him," Tonks whispered. "I don't know where it came from. I can't mention it to Harry – fuck, I don't want to mention it to myself, because it feels so damned good when I'm with him, even though everything in my mind is screaming that something is terribly wrong... and it's getting worse. There's a

voice in my head that just keeps telling me, reminding me, of him... I screwed something up, and now I don't know how I'm going to fix it."

Lupin didn't know what to say. He didn't expect this breakdown, not from Tonks. She always seemed so strong, so happy, so devil-may-care... this didn't seem like her.

"Do you think," he began cautiously, "that you might be under some sort of... I don't know, charm or enchantment?"

Tonks snorted. "Remus, I'm an Auror. And who would cast something like this on me, to make me want to... what, are you suggesting Harry would do that?"

"Of course not," Lupin replied quickly, "although from what I've heard recently, he's changed a lot –"

"Course he has, he's been through hell," Tonks said exasperatedly. "But I know Harry pretty well now, Remus, and while he is good, he's not that good."

"Then maybe it's some sort of magical effect," Lupin reasoned. "Were you experimenting with something that could have caused this mess –"

Tonks was silent, and Lupin felt a surge of worry fill his stomach.

"Tonks, have you been using Dark magic –"

"No," Tonks said flatly, turning back towards the window.

"Because some types of spells from that field of study –"

"I said no, okay?" Tonks snapped. "I can't say anything more."

And just like that, the anger returned, the hurt at being mistrusted again and again and again came back. Sometimes it was for being a werewolf, other times for being accused of selling out to Voldemort, and now this. I've listened to her, I've been honest with her, why the hell won't she trust me?

"I don't understand," Lupin began roughly, getting up from his seat, "why you're still not trusting me. It started right after you and Harry went to Gringotts months ago, and nothing's changed. So I think I've got the right to ask, right about now: what have I ever done not to have that trust? I've always supported you and Harry, and Sirius and I are practically brothers!"

"Perhaps it was because you would have told Dumbledore absolutely everything we would have done!" Tonks snarled, rounding on Lupin. The tears were gone now, and her hair was now matte-black. "Maybe it's because you weren't honest with Harry from the very beginning regarding your little part with the Potter Vaults? Maybe it's because in all of the ten years Harry spent at the fucking Dursleys, you never tried to find him!"

The words struck home.

Lupin could have thrown something at Tonks, and he could feel the beast inside him screaming. But he turned away, the blood leaving from his face. All the old poisonous guilt came rushing back, the frustration, the despair, the aimless rage and hatred... all the emotions he had tried to blot out for years, but never succeeded. In a second, he remembered the spiteful words that Snape had said...

"...you'll keep your muzzle tightly closed, werewolf, and you'll do it, too. But eventually, you'll give in to the pressure. Eventually, you'll have to come clean to Potter in the end. I'm expecting this – I'm planning on it, as a matter of fact – but don't think that little revelation won't cost you dearly..."

Lupin closed his eyes and blinked several times. The time had come – he knew Tonks would convey the truth to Harry in its entirety. The entire pathetic truth.

"Tonks."

"What?" Her voice was raw and abrupt, and Lupin couldn't blame her.

"You want the whole truth?"

"What does that mean?" Tonks asked suspiciously. "What's this about? Why you were at the Ministry before everything fell apart – and what were you thinking, trying to rescue –"

"I was under Imperius, and I don't remember anything, because Lucius Malfoy did a good job Obliviating me – or so at least Cassane says," Lupin replied heavily, sitting back down next to the fire. "No, I'm talking about the Potter Vaults."

"Are you willing to tell me what you know?" Tonks demanded. "Because we – as in Harry and I – need that money. What we're doing –"

"Whatever that is –"

" – It requires a lot of gold," Tonks snapped, glaring at Lupin. "Harry's money is gone, and I'm pretty much broke. I just paid the rent on an apartment with the remnants of my last paycheque, and the way things are going in the Ministry, I'm not going to getting much more from them. How much money's in the Vault anyways?"

"Enough," Lupin said tiredly, staring at his hands and the light dancing across them from the fire, dreading every coming moment, "but that's not the point. Can you sit down, please?"

Tonks' suspicious glare didn't let up, but she sat down one of the well-worn stools leaning against the counter, several feet away from Lupin. From the looks of things, she didn't want to get any closer.

"Do you remember your Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher in your seventh year?"

"Yes," Tonks replied warily. "Professor Chloe Shasbe. Crazy woman – taught me a whole lot of nothing, making my N.E.W.T.s a living hell and my Auror exams a lot worse. Why?"

"Because I applied for the Defense position that year," Lupin replied, picking up the dented and rusting poker and stabbing at the fire moodily. "Dumbledore asked me to – thought it'd be good for me. And

I did apply. And through the course of that application, I met Professor Snape. He and I hadn't corresponded in several years – indeed, not since we were on opposite sides of the war."

"How is this relevant –"

"Just listen," Lupin replied, his voice barely rising above the crackling of the fire, yet still audible across the room. "In any case, I asked him, in our conversation, where Harry was, how he was doing. He said he didn't know and he didn't care."

"Sounds like Snape," Tonks said curtly, crossing her arms over her chest.

Lupin let out a long, uneasy breath. "Except it wasn't, Tonks. He was enraged that I even asked. I snapped back, saying that after some of the things I had heard about the Potter Vaults and after I had testified in the closure case, I was surprised he wasn't concerned."

A look of confusion crossed Tonks' face, and her hair began changing colour wildly. "What does that mean?"

"He slammed me into the wall, and then blackmailed me into silence," Lupin continued, completely ignoring Tonks as he stared into the fire, the only real light in the cabin reflected in the hollowness of his expression. "He swore that he would kill me if the truth came out. And frankly, I'm not surprised – he was humiliated that I knew anything about it. But he also knew the one thing that would shut me up."

Tonks didn't say anything, and there was silence for a long few seconds. Lupin knew that she was waiting for him to speak, yet with every second, the lump of guilt in his throat grew even bigger, and his mouth was dry as sand.

"So I didn't reapply, and the year after, Quirrell came back, and I waited until Lockhart was gone before coming back to Hogwarts. But by then," Lupin said with a bitter laugh, "Snape had a much easier blackmail situation when I was at the school. All he would have needed to do was slip some dirty monkshood into my Wolfsbane

Potion, and I'd be dead in seconds – or worse, a rampaging monster."

"But that doesn't answer the big question here, Lupin," Tonks said angrily, "and that's what the hell did Snape have on you?"

Here it was. He could feel the shame rising like bile in his stomach, but he choked it back.

"I knew Harry was with the Dursleys the entire time – and I knew what was going on in that house – and I did nothing."

Tonks frowned. "That – that's all? If I remember correctly, so did McGonagall, Hagrid, and Dumbledore, and they didn't give a toss about that."

"Neither of them knew, before Hagrid found Harry, the conditions in which Harry was living," Lupin whispered, his eyes moistening. "But I did. And I swore to James that I wouldn't let his son come to harm. I visited Sirius in Azkaban, and though he doesn't remember it – the Dementors sucked the memory clean out of his mind, I think – even though I thought he was an murderer at the time, I swore to him that I would make sure Harry came to no harm.

"And I went back to Surrey, and I saw the neglect... I saw how lonely Harry was... and I did nothing. I failed James and Sirius... and I failed Harry. I know that I could have given him a better life, but I held back. I was terrified he would find out that I was a werewolf, that I couldn't save his parents, that they trusted me so little they considered me the spy – and they had reason to believe that. I'm not proud of what I did in the First War –"

"War is hell, we both know that!" Tonks cut him off, her eyes wide with shock and growing disgust. "So you didn't take Harry in."

"And I could have – hell, I should have," Lupin said vehemently, his entire body shaking. "And Dumbledore might not have approved of my act, but he knew I wasn't the traitor, and he wouldn't have stopped me. I could have had the opportunity to raise Harry, shield him from

harm... and I didn't take it. Instead... take a look at the plants outside the window, Tonks, and tell me what you see."

Tonks gave Lupin another disgusted look before looking out the window. She frowned for a few seconds, lighting her wand to better see the plants, and then –

"That's Knotgrass," Tonks said quietly. "You grew it – you used to smoke it. So this is where you disappeared to for all those years."

"When I couldn't afford the Wolfsbane Potion, it dulled the pain – along with everything else," Lupin whispered listlessly. "I could close my eyes, reopen them, and see a dream, a beautiful dream... I wouldn't have to feel the pain, I wouldn't have to suffer the guilt. It was easier to be wolf than man, and between the transformations and the Knotgrass... I didn't have to feel... feel anything. Between that and watching Harry, and living off the land... it ages you, Tonks. I could have given Harry a better life, and I didn't. I knew, and I could have done something – I swore to James and Sirius I would do something – and I failed. I'm as guilty as neglect as the Dursleys."

"And Snape found out you were spying on Harry, that you never spoke to him to give him a better life or tell him about his parents, and he blackmailed you with it. He threatened to expose you to Sirius, or Dumbledore... or Harry," Tonks said, finally connecting the dots.

"None of them would forgive me," Lupin murmured. "If they knew that I knew all along, and I did nothing..."

Tonks was tight-lipped – she let Lupin's voice trail off into the silence as the fire crackled in the grate. Lupin knew how he looked – slumped, defeated, a broken man ravaged by his own guilt and self-loathing... it disgusted him, but now she knew.

"I don't know if Harry will forgive you," Tonks said finally, rising off of the stool and looking around the cabin. "I don't think I can forgive you – that's pretty pathetic, Lupin."

"You don't have to tell me," Lupin said, rubbing the moistness away from his eyes with the back of his hand. He wasn't going to show that kind of shame, not now. I've had over ten years to be weak...

"So what do you know about the Potter Vaults?" Tonks asked, her eyes glittering as she drained the last of her tea before tossing the mug onto the floor. Lupin winced as the mug bounced and rattled.

"Snape knows the most – he was intimately involved with the proceedings. I gave testimony to that lawyer Miguel Prince, but I don't know whether it was held admissible in the Wizengamot – werewolf testimony rarely is. Prince is dead now, and so is the prosecuting attorney, but the judge responsible for the final decision is still alive. He's in Azkaban for treason and money laundering – he funnelled thousands of Galleons straight to Voldemort's pockets – but his vault writs were never thrown out."

"Why?" Tonks demanded furiously. "He was a treasonous bastard –"

"The judge worked exclusively with Voldemort, but he still had his own corrupt code of justice. Legitimate criminals and some of the nastier Death Eaters did go to prison under his jurisdiction, and he taught his sons who joined the Hit Wizards the same hard form of justice, following the creed of Barty Crouch," Lupin said bitterly. "Justice, law, and peace – regardless of the means. Fire with fire."

"I need a name, Remus."

Lupin finally met Tonks' haunted eyes. "You already have the name," he said with a heavy sigh. "His name is Claudius. Claudius Kemester."

The first thing he noticed was the smell. It was sharp, inorganic, the crisp odour of disinfectants and potions. He wrinkled his nose in distaste – he knew that smell anywhere.

He was in the Hospital Wing – again.

He coughed twice, and the first thing he noticed was that he was back in his original body – and that his head was killing him. A brutal, stabbing pain that felt like someone had driven a pick-axe into his skull –

"Good morning, Harry."

That got his eyes open. He blinked quickly as he tried to adjust to the sunlight cascading across the high white walls of the room. He reached for his glasses on the bedside table, and everything came into focus – including the smiling face of Luna Lovegood, sitting next to him on the next bed.

"What the... Luna? What are you doing here?" he whispered, rubbing his head unsteadily as he sat up against his pillow. "How... how did I get here?"

Luna fiddled absentmindedly with a hole in her pajamas, but her eyes didn't leave Harry. "Well, Isabelle, it was actually a bit strange. I was wandering around the fourth floor, when there were these crashing noises, and it sounded like the fireplace in one of the classrooms was exploding, and I thought that a Heliopath might have come through the Floo Network."

"A what?" Harry put his hand to his head, trying to rebuild his scattered memories. "And why are you calling me Isabelle again –"

"So I went into the classroom," Luna continued with a serious nod, "and I saw both Fred and George Weasley on the floor – apparently came through the fireplace on their brooms. A second later, something came out of the fire and I wake up a few days later in here. Apparently a Heliopath went through the fireplace and punctured one of my lungs in its flight before being subdued by Professor

McGonagall." She nodded with an air of grave seriousness. "I'm very grateful for her help."

Harry frowned as he tried to parse together the parts of Luna's story. That must have been me flying through the fireplace – but wait a minute; I was in my simulacrum then! Why am I back here, with injuries on my body? And where is my simulacrum? He looked hastily around the room and squinted carefully. As he expected, he could see the nearly transparent leylines in the air – both of them. The golden one that he knew connected him to 'Clarissa Desdame', and the silvery one to his... other form.

He frowned. Was it just him, or did it seem like the silvery leyline was flickering and moving on its own, even though he wasn't moving?

"Something must have been scrambled," he murmured, rubbing his head as he traced the leyline with his eyes. "Something must have gone wrong..."

And then it hit him – all of it.

He could see the fires roaring around him, burning everything in sight. He could hear the muted screams through the crackling of unfamiliar spells.

He could see his magic ripping through obstacles with horrifying, gory, efficiency.

And he could see a figure with a single arm slump in mid-air at the touch of green light, slide off his broom and tumble into the fires...

Harry felt sick. He couldn't see a bucket, so he leaned over onto the other side of the bed and vomited. After a few blurry seconds, it seemed like it had passed and Harry's throat and mouth were burning, but it wasn't over.

A second later, the rest of the contents in his stomach were on the floor.

He could feel Luna's hand on his back – she had moved closer – but Harry pulled himself away. He felt dirty, he felt unclean, he felt wrong. His heart was pounding heavily in his chest as he remembered the screaming in his mind, the voices...

"Harry..."

He heard a rapid shuffle of footsteps, and he vaguely noticed Madam Pomfrey's hand firmly guiding him back towards the bed as she Vanished the vomit and blood on the floor.

"No, he still hasn't recovered –"

"Yes, I have," Harry said abruptly, shoving away from Madam Pomfrey and reaching for his neatly folded school robes in the corner. "I'm not staying here another second, it's not safe."

"Mr. Potter, this is the Hospital Wing," Madam Pomfrey said reprovingly, hurrying to try and stop Harry, but Harry wasn't stopping. Luna had turned away while Harry had changed his pants, but now she was watching with wide eyes as Harry shoved the Healer away from him.

"I'm leaving."

"Mr. Potter, I insist you stay! Nothing here will hurt you!" she said angrily, picking up Harry's robes only to have Harry Summon them right out of her hands. "What is the matter with you?"

He couldn't say – he didn't dare say, not here. He only shook his head tightly, keeping the bile inside his mouth and swallowing back frantically as he pulled on his robes. He pulled on his shoes, and without tying them, he ran out of the room, his mind in another place...

"Mr. Potter, stop!"

But he ignored them. He just kept running. He didn't know where he was running, but he ran. His vision was a blur, his nose ached as his glasses bounced on it, his head was pounding with his every step as the vomit scalded his throat...

Then he saw it – a large, pinkish blob that was slowly opening to let a group of black-robed figures inside –

"Whoa –"

"Harry, slow –"

Harry didn't slow down. He just kept moving as fast as he could. Up the stairs, his feet pounding on the stone. The door flying open at his touch. He could see his four-poster bed, but that wasn't what he was looking for.

He tore the clasp of his trunk open as he rooted around. After a few seconds, his hands touched a new, yet instantly recognizable shape – a key. Yanking the key free and sending his books tumbling in his trunk, he reached under the bed and yanked the small, flat wooden case free. He fumbled with the lock for a few seconds, but then it clicked, and as he prised back the lid, he breathed a sigh of relief.

The Pensieve sparkled with silvery memories floating along the very bottom, but Harry had no desire to view those. Scrabbling for his wand, he brought the horrifying images of the Ministry to the front of his mind... and all over again, he could hear the screaming, the blood...

Without hesitation, he slapped the tip of his wand to his temple and pulled. A few moments later, a long silvery string of memory slid out of his mind – and was batted into the Pensieve. His temple stung when he shoved his wand against it again, but he wasn't going to stop until everything was out. He pulled the next memory out... and then the next... and then the next.

The screams grew muted, and when Harry tried to remember the Ministry fight, it all became a blur the second after he said the last words to that reporter within. He breathed a short sigh of relief – one that caught in his throat. I had attacked a man in the morgue... and who knows if he survived –

He didn't think this time. The wand was at his temple, and he yanked the memory free, shoving into the silvery morass in the bowl. Now it was just a blur... he couldn't hear the screams...

He closed the Pensieve's case and locked it, shoving the key deep into his pocket. Then, after a few seconds, he rose to his feet.

The wave of tiredness hit him like an avalanche. His eyes felt excruciatingly heavy, his brain felt fuzzy...

Harry felt his face hit the warm softness of his pillows, and he thought no more.

"Hermione, I still don't see why you brought me up here," Neville said nervously.

"Just be quiet, okay?" Hermione interrupted, cautiously unlocking the door with a wave of her wand. "I couldn't find Ron, and you're the next best person."

Neville didn't have the slightest clue how Hermione had leapt to that conclusion, but he capitulated and crept into the tiny circular room. Neville immediately felt repulsed – the entire room stank of blood with a very heavy tinge of something that made Hermione go bright red...

"Hermione, do you know that smell?" he asked nervously, stepping around the room to where Hermione was looking out the dirty window, her nose wrinkled.

"Yes, I do," she said uncomfortably, "and you really don't want to know what it is..."

"Why?" Neville was bewildered. "And why does this room smell so bad?"

"This is where the first attack was," Hermione whispered, looking back around the room and carefully scanning every inch of it. "Where those Ravenclaw girls got... hurt. That smell... Neville, how much do you know about teenage girls?"

"Uh... what, uh, exactly do you mean?" Neville asked.

"Do you know... God, this is awkward... Neville, do you know what a girl does every month?" Hermione asked, her hair bushier than ever as she went beet-red with embarrassment.

Neville clapped his hand to his nose. "Eww...that's gross, Hermione Granger, why did you tell me that? I could have gone the rest of my life without knowing that..."

"And... Neville, I'm only telling you this part because my mother gave me a book on sexual education when I was younger, but the other smell... well, do you know what happens when a man and a woman –"

"Oh God, Hermione!" Neville exclaimed, going red himself. "That... that's what a... what a girl... when she gets... gross!"

"Wet, I think, is the term..." Hermione looked quite sick. "Can we change the subject?"

"Can we leave the room? Please?" Neville was already moving towards the door, trying not to touch anything as he held his hand over his nose and mouth.

After the two of them were out of the room, Neville let out a gasp as he leaned against the wall, trying to pull fresh air into his lungs.

"Really, Hermione, was that necessary? Why did you have to bring me along?"

"Because I need your opinion on something," Hermione said intently, pulling a scrap of paper from her bag and a snub-nosed Muggle pencil. "No time for ink right now, I'm trying to get this all copied down –"

"I still don't think you needed me on that," Neville said resentfully, still holding his nose.

"Sorry, Neville, but without Ron... I didn't know who else to talk to," Hermione said in a rush. "I'm trying to come up with a theory behind these attacks, getting any help I can, and I need someone to listen to my ideas, see if I'm not making up lunacy."

"And you really can't go to Harry, after what happened in the locker rooms," Neville finished heavily. "All right, give me what you have here."

"I... I think the past two attacks – that on the girls, and on those Gryffindor boys – I think they're linked somehow," Hermione said in a rush, picking up her bag and starting down the corridor. "I don't know what's causing the attacks yet, but powerful magic creates patterns, and I think I'm starting to see one."

"What kind of pattern could there be with... with that?" Neville asked, trying to think through the confusion.

"The smell in that room suggests that some of the blood... well, it implies some sort of sexual activity," Hermione began, looking a little disgusted, as if she was implying something extremely vulgar. "And what happens when people have sex?"

"You're asking me?" Neville replied with horror. "Hermione, I was raised by my grandmother – I didn't get that sort of education –"

"Babies, Neville," Hermione said with irritation. "For heaven's sake, the wizarding world can be so backwards sometimes – anyways, it implies conception of children... or maybe birth, I'm not sure. The second attack was against Dennis and those Gryffindor boys – all of whom were smaller than average. You know what that means?"

Neville thought hard for a few seconds. "They... they represented children – the next stage of life, if you're thinking of that..."

"I am," Hermione said, her voice getting faster and faster as she began striding fervently down the hallway. "If my Arithmancy classes are to be believed, magic tends to work better when it's based upon patterns, sometimes in natures, but most of the time in symbols. So,

following that logic, if we want to find the instigator of everything, we just have to..."

"Find the place where everything began?" Neville guessed. "Uh, Hermione..."

"Right! All we need to do is find the place where everything started and –"

"Hermione, what's before conception?"

Hermione froze for a couple of seconds, and Neville could tell that some of her confidence had leaked away. "We'll figure it out – right now we need to go to the Library –"

"Wait, wait, wait, Hermione!" Neville frantically shouted as he said, picking up his pace to catch up and overtake Hermione. "Wouldn't it make sense to... oh, I dunno, go talk to Professor Moody about this? Just to give him the details?"

Hermione swallowed hard, but a second later, she had pulled him into a corner next to one of the stone columns, her voice tight and urgent. "Neville, I don't think it's safe to tell the teachers about this."

Neville's eyebrows shot into his hair. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Neville, I haven't told anyone about this," she whispered tensely, "but a few days ago, Ernie, Ron, and I ran into Malfoy, and a couple of the other Slytherins. I think they might have been involved in this mess at some point, so I've been spying on them. Anyways, I tried calling Malfoy out on this, and Ernie said he was going to tell the staff and..." Her voice trailed off, and the silence said more to Neville about the horror of the situation than anything Hermione had said. He felt a rush of panic.

"Hermione, what's going on?"

"Ernie didn't have a chance to tell the staff," Hermione whispered. "He hasn't been seen for three days. There's been no messages, no

notes or anything. I'm starting to think he might have been possessed and something has happened to him..."

"And nobody's told Sprout about this?" Neville asked incredulously. "I mean, students go missing at Hogwarts all the time, but I don't think she'd want to see another student die in one year –"

"Don't say that!" Hermione exclaimed fearfully, her eyes darting around as she shoved Neville away and began walking even faster.

"Hermione, stop!"

"Neville, I can't afford to be wrong about this!" Hermione cried, and Neville was struck by the unexpected quaver in her voice. "This is worse than the Chamber of Secrets – and we're on our own this time! I need every clue I can possibly find, every pattern needs to be realized... and I can't take any risks that could... that could..."

She couldn't continue, and Neville was lost for words. He hadn't seen Hermione like this since she had encountered Harry in the locker room. Everything's spiralling out of control for her... and she doesn't know how to deal with it...

He shook his head and continued down the stairs, lost in his own thoughts, completely unaware that someone under an Invisibility Cloak not thirty paces away had seen and heard everything that had been said.

The sleep had done wonders for clearing his head, and when Harry finally awoke, it was evening. He wasn't sure what day it was, but he guessed, since Dean Thomas was sitting on his bed scribbling absently, it was likely a weekend.

"I'm surprised you've been able to sleep," Dean spoke without looking up as he readjusted his lamp and paper. "None of the rest of us have been able to catch more than a few hours every night."

"Guess I just get lucky sometimes," Harry replied carefully as he shrugged on his robes. "You know what day it is?"

"Sunday, Harry," Dean replied, finally looking up and fixing Harry with a steady expression. "I haven't seen you a lot this term, you know. People are starting to notice it."

"Notice what?" Harry asked irritably.

"In between not sleeping and missing classes like you are, you're falling behind pretty badly," Dean replied. It wasn't an accusation – just a fair, reasoned observation. "I dunno if you're handed a single piece of homework in the past few weeks, 'cause I haven't seen it – and that's mighty strange, considering this is O.W.L. year. And I've got no idea what you're doing with Quidditch, or what Angelina's got planned for the team, but you haven't been to any practices as far as I've seen."

"Thanks, but I can take care of myself," Harry replied after a few seconds, bending to feel under his bed. He felt his fingers brush against the wooden box, and he breathed a little easier – it hadn't been disturbed.

Dean raised his hands. "Hey, you're able to catch some sleep – puts you ahead of everyone else in this castle – but I've got to wonder what the famous – or infamous – Harry Potter's been doing different. You're off the map, Harry, and people are starting to notice."

"I've been busy," Harry retorted, picking up his bag a little more quickly than usual and slinging it hard over his shoulder. "Some things are more important than O.W.L.s."

"Hey, I told you, I'm not judging," Dean said innocently. "All I'm saying is that... well, whenever something goes wrong, you're there, and whenever it goes right, you're there too. No happy medium, Harry – there's no balance. All that bouncing from one side to another... sooner or later, you're going to be off the wagon entirely."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing too deep, Harry," Dean replied, turning back to his paper with another shrug. "As I said, I'm just someone who watches from the side – you've got more going on, I guess. Luck to you on that."

Harry paused – what was that in Dean's tone? It wasn't resentment, but it wasn't encouragement either...

He shook his head – he was over-thinking this, and he couldn't even remember the last time he ate. "Do you know where Ron is?"

"Well, it's after dinner, so I'm guessing up the Owlery," Dean replied smoothly, dipping his quill in his precariously-placed ink bottle with a practiced motion. "He's been up there the past few days, whenever he doesn't have classes."

"Thanks," Harry said, his mind wandering as he left the dormitory – ignoring the fact that Seamus Finnigan had been watching the entire conversation from his own bed with suspicious eyes.

Draco Malfoy's hands were shaking as he reread the letter. It was impossible, he couldn't believe what he was reading. No, this isn't happening. Not to us... not to the Malfoys...

"Guess there is a reason the Prophet hasn't been coming as regularly as we'd like," Zabini said with a low whistle as he stepped away from Malfoy's shoulder, where he had scanned the brief letter that Malfoy's mother had written. "If the rest of the wizarding world got wind of this... well, there'd be hell to pay –"

"This country's going to the fucking dogs!" Malfoy snarled, ripping the letter in half as righteous fury surged through him. "How dare the Ministry do this to us? How dare they? After everything we've done –"

"They're probably happy to get rid of you," Nott remarked smugly, leaning back in his armchair that he had magically augmented in his favourite library corner. Malfoy knew, in a remote and secure part of his mind, that the chair had been enchanted to recline and warm to its owner's every comfort, but he also knew, in that same rational mindset, that given the pervert Nott was, he'd never sit in that chair. Probably touches himself there when he's reading from the Restricted Section...

"Malfoy... Draco, get a grip."

He felt Zabini's hard grip on his shoulder, and in that second, he realized that he'd been panting, his face contorted with fury, and that the letter was now torn fragments in his hand.

"They're throwing my family to the dogs –"

"Malfoy, not here," Zabini growled.

"No, worse than dogs, to the bloody fucking goblins just to appease them –"

"In all due fairness, if the letter's to be believed, your father did start it," Zabini said coldly. "He probably doesn't want you to know about all this – he knows it would be an unnecessary distraction to the plan."

"This is the reason," Malfoy growled through tightly clenched teeth, "that we need someone like the Dark Lord in office – so that loyal, pureblood families are not cast as scapegoats to appease those subhuman fucks–"

"Quit swearing, Malfoy, it's unbecoming of your station," Nott said lazily, reclining backwards farther in his chair. "In any case, it's irrelevant. So your parents have to flee because the evil goblins have firebombed Malfoy Manor into oblivion – what does it matter? Your parents were tipped off by the Ministry and able to flee with their lives, shouldn't that be good enough?"

"Considering your family doesn't own anything more valuable than horse piss, I can see why the obvious insult to the Malfoys would go over your head," Malfoy snapped. Nott bristled at the comment, but Zabini cut him off before he was able to say anything more.

"Any word about Snape?"

"You were reading the letter over my shoulder!"

"You tore it to shreds before I was done reading it," Zabini said exasperatedly, glaring at Malfoy as he sat back down opposite Nott, leaving the blond standing. "So what did it say about Snape?"

"Still gone," Malfoy muttered. "Mother doesn't know where – and according to Father, the Dark Lord has successfully managed to remove Dumbledore from the equation as well."

"Only helps us a bit, so sit back down, Nott," Zabini snapped, as Nott had leaned forward with obvious hungry interest. "So Dumbledore's gone to who-knows-where – he's not dead, though. And Snape's gone too – he was our shield against bastards like Moody and McGonagall. We'll have to tread carefully – particularly now that Granger and Weasley are onto things."

"The Weasleys have other things to worry about," Malfoy said, a hint of a vindictive expression creeping onto his face, a slight respite against his own fury. His hands were still shaking a bit, but he was able to sit back down with relative grace. "Second oldest blood traitor brother was killed in the Ministry. One down, six to go."

"Fine, Granger then," Zabini said tersely. "She needs to be silenced."

"She doesn't have the balls to stop us now, or the information she needs," Nott said with an idle wave of his hand as he leaned back. An eerily dreamy expression appeared on his face as he looked at the ceiling. "Only I have that now..."

"Nott, stop doing that, it's creepy as hell," Zabini snapped. "And what about Potter? Apparently, he's back at Hogwarts now."

Malfoy's face hardened. "We watch him – and we move very carefully."

He found Ron in the Owlery.

His friend was standing by a cracked window, the pale glimmer of moonlight tracing strange lines across the aerie, cutting strange shapes as it shot across the high twisted beams covered with owl nests and droppings. It was very quiet – the owls had gone out

hunting for the night, and only a few remained, rustling near the highest rafters.

Harry had taken an involuntary deep breath before he stepped into the room – it didn't smell the greatest – and he saw Ron turn when he breathed out. Even in the dim light, Ron looked terrible. His eyes were shadowed, and red from tears. His robes were dirty, and it looked like Ron had slept in them a few nights in a row, or at least tried to sleep. But worst of all, Harry could see that some of the confidence, even if it was somewhat superficial, that had Ron had clung to had been snatched away. His posture was slumped, and somehow he didn't seem nearly as tall as he usually did.

"Dean told me where to find you," Harry began carefully, cross the room to reach his friend.

"It was either him or Neville, but it's nice to see you," Ron replied emotionlessly, not meeting Harry's eyes. "Are you feeling..."

"I'm better," Harry replied quickly, a lump forming in his throat. "Are you... did the twins tell you?"

Ron gave him a wordless nod. Harry swallowed hard.

"I saw him fall. He... he went like a champion – and he went when he was flying. Best way to go, in my opinion." Harry let out a hesitant laugh, but when Ron didn't respond, he swallowed hard again. The lump in his throat was growing bigger.

Ron took a shuddering breath, and Harry waited in anticipation for Ron's words – anything that Ron would say, that he could help somehow...

"Fred and George told me and Ginny at the same time," Ron said, his voice breaking badly as he struggled to hold his composure. "Ginny's been crying the past few days – sobbing her eyes out. The girls have been trying to help her, but she needs Mum now. I d-don't even know if she or Dad even knows yet... and Fred and George... Merlin, I don't know what to think about them."

"Where are they?" Harry whispered.

"Quidditch pitch," Ron replied, his voice shaking again as he gripped the window ledge tightly. "They keep flying around the pitch for hours and hours – smacking the Bludgers at each other, blowing them up with spells when they lose control, and repairing them a second later to do it all again. It's crazy... Harry, they want revenge. I've never seen them like this. It's more than... it's more than a little scary."

Harry couldn't say anything – the lump in his throat was too big. He couldn't tell Ron the truth – not now, it would break them both to hear it aloud –

"They won't tell me what h-happened," Ron continued, his voice shaking now, his breath coming in tight gasps. "They knew you were there, but that you couldn't do anything to save him... they'd had nearly beaten you..."

He could hear Ron's words ringing in his ears, and his mind flashed back to that sudden flash of green light... the flash from his wand...

" – And I keep thinking, 'If my best friend, the fucking Boy-Who-Lived who's faced You-Know-Who three times and lived, can't save my brother... then I'm not ready for this.'" Ron's voice broke badly, and without warning, he grabbed Harry's arm, finally turning to face him. "If even you couldn't have saved him, what hope in hell do I have?"

The tears were coming freely now, and Harry forced back his own emotion. He wasn't going to cry now, not because of this. A perverse part of his mind hissed that he didn't deserve to cry – that emotion was reserved for those who lost, not for the one who took it away...

He met Ron's eyes. "I'm sorry, Ron. I... I wish..."

He couldn't say any more. He looked away, the horrible feeling of guilt surging up inside of him. Even with the memory dulled and blurred in his mind, the feeling he had been forcing back was still there. He wasn't going to say anything – he couldn't say anything more... it would be wrong if he did...

"I'm not blaming you, Harry."

Harry's eyes snapped up. "You should," he blurted, without even thinking.

"No, damn it! You fought like a fucking hero, Harry," Ron said fiercely, his other hand grabbing Harry's shoulder and shaking it roughly. "The fact you were able to get through that hell and live... damn it, no other wizard apart from bloody Dumbledore could have done that! You did everything, there was nothing you could have done... no, I can already see it, and don't you fucking dare blame yourself for this! You did all you could!"

The torrent of raw emotion in Ron's voice was nearly too much. Harry could feel his eyes moistening, but he blinked furiously. He tried to steady his breathing, regain his control...

"It's hard not to," he whispered finally. "Blame yourself, I mean."

Ron let go of Harry's shoulder, and looked back out the window. Harry could see a tear running unchecked down Ron's cheek, tracing a long thin line.

"If I ever find that bitch," Ron whispered, his eyes fixed on the moon, "the one that killed my brother, I'm going to kill her. I don't give a damn who she is, or where she's from, or whatever else she might have done – I'm going to kill her. No mercy, no second chances."

He turned to Harry. "And I want you to teach me how to do it."

Now it was too much. He had just heard Ron, though his friend didn't know it, pronounce his death sentence.

And he wanted Harry to teach him to carry out the deed.

He doesn't have to know the truth.

Harry finally met Ron's haunted eyes – eyes that he had seen before, in the mirror. Filled with complete grim resolve, knowing that there

was nothing left to lose, Harry felt a rush of horror as he saw those eyes.

He doesn't have to know the truth.

And he wouldn't – that, Harry would ensure. It would break Ron – and me – to finally realize that truth. He doesn't have to know.

"I'll help you," Harry whispered, his voice devoid of emotion.

Ron threw his arms around Harry, forcing back a choking sob, and the inherent wrongness of the entire scene screamed at Harry louder than the deafening silence.

"I'll teach you how to kill."

Harry swore under his breath as he stormed out of the Charms classroom, cramming books into his hands while he walked. He could hear Ron shouting after him, but he ignored the voice – he was seething.

He should have expected it, really. The curriculum didn't stop just because he had been in the Hospital Wing or outside of Hogwarts – and it only took Charms a few minutes to prove that to him. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make the spell work – a spell that most of the class managed to master after a few tries. His face burned with anger – it had been a long time since he had felt that humiliated...

He felt a hand grab his shoulder, and he spun quickly, his hand darting to his wand.

"What?"

"Merlin, Harry, get a bloody grip!" Ron exclaimed, giving his friend a shake for good measure. "This was going to happen, you know! You've missed a lot of school!"

"I can see that," Harry growled, shrugging out of Ron's grip. "Come on, we've got Potions."

"Look, I understand how you feel," Ron began as they descended the stairs towards the dungeons. "Trust me, I do. It happens, Harry, remember how long it took for you to get Summoning Charms last year – and look, the class already worked on this charm for a couple of days before today, so don't feel bad you couldn't get it –"

"It's funny," Harry snarled, ignoring Ron completely as he picked up his pace, "that I've got an arsenal of killing spells that rivals most Death Eaters and I can't even make a bubble of water hover in mid-air with a spell –"

"Keep your voice down!"

"And you've got to wonder why the hell such a bloody useless charm even exists – can't see much of a point of –"

"Just because it's not a battle spell – oh, for heaven's sake, Harry, I didn't design the damned curriculum," Ron replied heatedly. "I don't know why Flitwick's teaching us this – frankly, it's the least of your worries, considering the O.W.L's are coming up..."

"Fucking useless magic," Harry muttered as they entered the Entrance Hall and crossed through the crowd of milling students as they headed towards the Dungeons. "Probably still in the curriculum 'cause some imbecile thought it would be artistic or some garbage –"

"It's probably used for cleaning or something," Ron reasoned, his voice lightening as Harry's temper dampened. "I dunno, with some other charm that makes it scrub dishes or something –"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like that's relevant to me right now," he grumbled as they reached the door to the Potions classroom. "It doesn't matter anyways, I'll get Tonks to teach me the useful spells later..."

"Just make sure you teach me those killing curses you mentioned," Ron muttered, his voice barely audible as they slipped into the room. "At least before you... ah, hell."

Harry cocked an eyebrow as he surveyed the Potions classroom. Instead of the usual rows of desks, someone had taken the liberty of setting up a series of massive leaded glass cauldrons around the room, all filled with a strange opaque liquid. The room was stifling hot, and Harry tugged at his collar as he moved towards where he usually sat at the back of the classroom.

"Let me guess," he began tonelessly as he sat down at the tiny side-table that was propped precariously against the side of his cauldron, "this was a project you were all working on while I was gone."

"Hey, we all get fresh samples at the beginning of class if ours are bungled," Ron replied with a shrug. "Professor Redland thought it would be a good idea – and this is only our second class with her –"

Harry snapped up. "I'm sorry, who? Where's the piece of shit that normally teaches this class?"

Ron winced at Harry's language, and Hermione, who had just arrived in the classroom and sat on the other side of Ron, threw Harry a sharply disapproving look. Harry met her glare in kind – he didn't have the patience to deal with her right now.

"Snape," Ron said bracingly, "hasn't been seen here since you got brought into the Hospital Wing, so Professor McGonagall got the Head Girl – Sarah Redland – to teach the class to us."

"She any good?" Harry asked coolly, eyeing the curvy brunette with some interest as she walked into the room. She seemed pretty, but an abundance of freckles and a very nervous expression gave her the look of a much younger girl, and certainly not one taking over for Snape, of all people.

"She's a Hufflepuff who wrote her N.E.W.T. in Potions a year early, and got an 'Outstanding'," Ron replied with a hint of a grin as he pulled out his very battered Potions textbook.

"Still don't know how she managed to skip ahead," Hermione muttered, bent over her notes as she scribbled frantically. "Else I would have done it in some courses ages ago..."

The Head Girl cleared her throat, and Harry looked up as 'Professor' Redland began writing on the board hurriedly. Harry ignored her, instead looking around the classroom –

Malfoy.

The blond Slytherin was sitting with Blaise Zabini (who looked supremely haughty and unimpressed with the new teacher), and a strange-looking weedy boy that Harry remembered as Theodore Nott. The three of them looked disgustingly pleased with themselves.

But it was Malfoy Harry focused on. He was looking better than before – the shadows under his eyes were faded somewhat – but there was something about his expression that made Harry clench his fist with rising rage. That bastard's Death Eater father took every bit of gold I ever had, and he still has the gall to look me in the eye –

He felt Ron grab his shoulder again.

"Keep your cool, mate, this isn't the time –"

"He has the nerve to sit there and–"

"Believe me, I know," Ron growled. They could both hear the Professor hurriedly speaking in the background, but neither of them cared much now. "And you don't even know the half of it, 'cause Hermione thinks –"

"I've got more reasons to hate Malfoy than anything Hermione's come up with," Harry said through gritted teeth, tearing his eyes away from the Slytherin and forcibly bringing them to the blackboard. He couldn't focus on it, but at that moment, he didn't really care. It's his fault... if his father hadn't taken my gold and pissed off the goblins, the Aurors wouldn't have been gathering for Fudge's double announcement in the Ministry... and I wouldn't have fought Scrimgeour... and Charlie would still be alive...

He knew it was irrational, he knew it didn't make much sense, but at least now he could give his rage a target – and from the look of Ron's face, it was a perfectly valid target.

"...your potions need to be kept at a boil until approximately a third of the potion has been boiled away," Redland finished with a clap of her hands that caused most of the class to jump. "By the end of the class, your potions should be a fine milky turquoise matching the shade in your text. Now start!"

And with that, the Head Girl returned to her desk – Snape's old desk, from the look of it – and opened a book. Harry blinked a few times – Redland was hardly showing any interest in the class at all, and even though she seemed dwarfed behind Snape's massive desk, her disinterest was surprising.

"Come on," Ron said with a grunt, "we need to slice up the ginger roots and turn up the fire – from the looks of this, this Potion's going to take a bit of time to get right."

"What is it, anyways?" Harry replied as he began carefully shredding his roots, his imagining of Malfoy as the root doing wonders for his precision and enthusiasm.

"Some kind of stone-etching acid," Ron said as he fiddled with his fire with a few prods of his wand. "Nasty stuff, apparently. Use your dragonhide gloves, this stuff can apparently sear through a lot of things, that's why we're using glass cauldrons –"

"The Etching Solution can be used for more than just stone, Ron," Hermione replied irritably as she tipped her roots into her cauldron and began stirring. "It can also cut through metal, most dragonhides, and even some types of glass..."

Harry stopped paying attention – Malfoy was whispering something to Nott, and for once, Harry was actually curious what the two were saying. From the outraged expression on Nott's face, Harry guessed it wasn't good.

He let a cool smile slide onto his face as he began working avidly on his potion. In a strange way, it was relaxing, and without Snape pestering him, he was making surprisingly good time.

He chanced another glance at Malfoy as he poured a small measure of beetles' eyes into the cauldron. The steam got significantly thicker, but Harry could still see Nott whisper something to Malfoy – and for Malfoy's expression to grow from collected to outright furious. Strangely, he could see a very pleased expression on Nott's face – what the hell was going on?

He stirred his potion a little more roughly, and the steam grew a little thicker, but he didn't keep his attention off of Malfoy. Something was going on. Looks like Ron was right all those weeks ago, there is something going on with Malfoy...

The class was passing without incident – and then there was a hiss and a shout of painful surprise. Harry snapped his glance over to where Neville was scrambling back onto his stool and tearing at his smoking gloves, as his cauldron began to overflow...

Redland's wand was out in a second, and with a muttered word, Neville's potion vanished into nothingness. But his gloves were still smoking, and Harry could see with shock that the potion was burning its way through...

Redland's expression was a mixture of sympathy and annoyance. "Only Longbottom would be able to find a way to hurt himself in a class with glass cauldrons. Come on, Neville, let's get you up to the Hospital Wing before the acid gets on your hands and Madam Pomfrey yells at me again..."

And with surprising alacrity, she had left the class with Neville – leaving the entire room unsupervised.

Uh oh.

The students turned back to tend to their dangerously boiling potions or to clean up, breaking into a hubbub of conversation, but Malfoy was fingering his badge – his prefect badge – on his chest, his jaw

clenched with the air of someone doing something he really didn't want to do.

"Oy, Potter!"

Harry didn't respond. Malfoy didn't deserve a response. He continued stirring his potion – it was actually coming along quite well, the potion was becoming a very nice aqua colour...

"Potter!"

"Malfoy, shut up."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Malfoy drawled, carefully siphoning a bit of potion into a crystalline glass flask. Harry was reminded, for a second, of when one of those very vials had been hurled at him in Diagon Alley. And filled with that acid, they'd be a hell of a lot more dangerous indeed...

"Yeah, I'd like that," Harry replied shortly. "So would the rest of the class, and most of the wizarding world in general, so please oblige us."

There was a smattering of laughter, and Ron gave him a quick thumbs-up. Malfoy, however, only narrowed his eyebrows.

"I've got a warning for you, Potter, one you'd do well to hear," he growled, rising to his feet and setting his full vial down with an audible thunk as he circled the cauldron, moving towards Harry.

"The warning's only as good as the source," Harry replied, shoving away his anger as he kept a steady eye on his cauldron. Flame's getting a little low... should probably give it a boost –

A shadow fell over him, and he saw Malfoy standing on the other side of the cauldron, a deadly expression on his face.

"You're blocking my light, Malfoy."

"You should really hear this warning, Potter," Malfoy hissed through gritted teeth, "if you don't want your closest friends dead – or in your case, worse. I think you know what that means."

He did know what it meant, and suddenly, he could hear every word Malfoy was saying, without any distractions. His potion frothed beneath him, but he had stopped caring – blood was pounding in his ears, and met Malfoy's stare with every ounce of hatred he could muster.

"Is that a threat?" Harry said quietly, rising to his own feet. Ron was struggling with his own potion, but Harry knew Hermione was watching avidly. Surprisingly, the rest of the class didn't even seem to notice. He kept his posture natural, his hands away from his wand – it would be suicidal to duel in here, with the dangerously unstable potions around them. "I don't take kindly to threats – ask your father about that."

Malfoy's eyes flashed, and his hand began creeping to his pocket. "You're dealing with bigger stakes than you know, Potter – and we both know what happens when someone plays out of their league."

"You don't stand a chance against me, Malfoy, if that's what this is about," Harry growled. "Once again, ask your father – or rather, ask him why you'll never have a baby brother."

"A toothless threat from a Knut-less imbecile," Malfoy spat. "Although I heard your parents had some money. Merlin, wonder what happened to it – do you think the Potter Vaults are sealed because they might be empty, your father pissing it away on Firewhiskey and whores while your Mudblood mother watched –"

He was barely holding back his rage now – only his common sense and caution was preventing him from hitting Malfoy, cursing him, ripping him to pieces like he did in the Ministry –

"Stop talking, Malfoy, and I won't –"

"But you have nothing now," Malfoy finished, his face twisting into a smile. "Just like the Weasleys – or whatever's left of them –"

He snapped.

It seemed like he was moving in slow motion, his hands tearing towards Malfoy. His vision seemed to darken, and he was back in the Ministry, the world only lit by flames and curses in a red haze –

His right hand seized Malfoy's throat and squeezed, but the grip was not firm. He sidestepped around the cauldron, his right hand twisting its grip on Malfoy's neck as his left hand grabbed a fistful of blond hair –

And it was one motion, even as he could see Hermione's mouth open to scream, grabbing Malfoy's head and forcing it down towards the frothing potion below –

He could feel Malfoy begin to thrash, but a second later, the thrashing stopped as the Slytherin's face hit the acid, and the sizzling filled the air with more steam –

Steam... steam and the familiar smell of burning flesh –

He could see Ron yelling, Hermione going for her wand, but the noises were muted by his rage. All he could hear was the sizzling... that satisfying sizzle, as he boiled his enemy into nothingness –

-and he deserves it too... five years of merciless taunting... how do you like this NOW, Malfoy -

-HARRY, WHAT ARE YOU -

He pulled up on the hair, and he could see potion running in rivulets down Malfoy's face - no, that wasn't right, it was carving the rivulets in his face, tiny bubbles springing up across the smoking lines that were spreading as Malfoy open his mouth to scream -

-he'll look like Voldemort when I'm done... apt, considering Voldemort will be next - yes, you bastard, broil in the open air -

- HE'S KILLING HIM - HARRY, STOP -

The scent of burning flesh was raw on Harry's nostrils, so he did the natural thing when one encounters an unpleasant burning object - he plunged Malfoy's face back in the liquid.

The sizzling was ear-splitting now, the turquoise potion frothing madly to white as Harry forced it deeper, submerging it further, the potion hot on his dragonskin gloves -

-and this head will match his father's other head... balance has been restored -

"STUPEFY!"

There was a sudden flash of scarlet, and everything went black.

"Get up, Potter."

Harry groaned and rubbed his head, keeping his eyes tightly clenched shut as his hand went to his pocket –

His wand wasn't there.

In a second, he was awake, his nerves singing with raw panic. He looked around wildly for the source of the voice in the dark room as his blood pumped furiously, sending his nerves aflame. He scrambled to a sitting position, moving to jump to his feet –

"Stay down, Potter."

His eyes snapped to the source of the voice, and he started – two wands were being pointed at his face, and one of them was his own.

Professor Mad-Eye Moody grunted and kept his stare fixed on Harry as he gave his own wand an experimental twirl. "Glad you're not that stupid, Potter," he said grimly, sending a jet of red hot sparks from the tip of his wand. Harry recoiled, but he didn't dare move – Moody was one of the best.

"Although," the ex-Auror continued, his mismatched eyes narrowing, "your behaviour with Malfoy in the classroom suggests otherwise."

And the memories began rushing back, and Harry gritted his teeth. "Is Malfoy dead?"

"No, though I think he wishes he was."

"Damn," Harry muttered. "Should have –"

"Should have done what, Potter?" Moody snarled, sending an avalanche of sparks into Harry's face before kicking him with the clawed wooden foot. "I thought you were smarter, Potter! I thought you had discretion. I thought you had a few brain cells bouncing around in that thick skull!"

"I was provoked –"

"That means nothing!" Moody roared, kicking Harry square in the kidneys this time. "Do you have any bloody idea what you've done? Despite the obvious catharsis you salvaged from your little outburst, you failed to realize that you attacked him in plain bloody sight! They didn't hear what that stupid little boy had to say – they just saw you ram his head into a full cauldron of Etching Solution!" He let out a snort of disgust and disappointment. "If they didn't think you were a sociopath before from the Prophet, they'll believe it now!"

"He deserved it!" Harry yelled, very real anger surging through him. "What he said, what his family's done to me –"

His voice was cut off a second later, because Moody had hit Harry again, this time with a spell that sent him sprawling on the floor. He felt his nose crunch painfully, and a torrent of blood spill across his face...

"The father's not the son, Potter!" Moody spat. "Merlin, what happened to the conniving and intelligent Potter that Dumbledore actually trusted to be an asset for our cause? That Potter at least had the intelligence to control his temper and not react to the utterly

meaningless insults given by the pathetic and otherwise inconsequential spawn of a Death Eater!"

"The best of us lose control sometimes –" Harry began furiously, wiping blood from his nose.

"And you think you're the best of us, Potter?" Moody snarled, his electric-blue eye spinning wildly as his dark eye burned with disappointed fury. "Just because you got a few lessons from my apprentice and beat Voldemort's Death Eaters a few times, that you got out of the Ministry alive and relatively unscarred –"

"Not unscarred –"

"You think you're ready to take on a pile of the most vile and detestable wizards and witches to walk this bloody planet?" Moody roared. "A wizard capable of that doesn't fall for cheap insults and lose control, particularly when the last shreds of his credibility are in danger! A wizard that Dumbledore and I support doesn't try to murder an 'innocent' in front of dozens of bystanders! Why should I believe or support a damn thing you say or do after this?"

Harry was breathing fast, as his mind reeled. He knew he had screwed up – big time. Though he didn't feel a bit of remorse for attacking Malfoy, he realized with a pang of horror his fatal error. Everyone had seen... and I don't have an excuse...

"McGonagall wants to expel you, and despite any sympathies I might have towards your feelings against Malfoy, I won't argue with her sentiment," Moody continued grimly. "Fortunately for us, and unfortunately for you, that option's not available – yet. Throwing you out of Hogwarts would be the stupidest thing our side could possibly do at this time – Voldemort would kill you in a second. But that does not mean there won't be reciprocity for your asinine behaviour, and we're resorting to other options."

"What are you –"

"Since you can't be trusted to hold your temper among your fellow students, and since house solidarity means precisely nothing to you,"

Moody spat, his voice heavy with disgust, "you won't be with Gryffindor anymore. Your dormitory has been emptied – you'll be staying in my office from now on. You will not be permitted to attend classes with your peers, or eat with them. All of your studying will be done in my office, under my unerring supervision. You will only be permitted out of my office for a few hours at night – and don't think I won't find you if you don't come back on time – or when you're working on the one project Dumbledore trusted you and I with – the attacks."

"That's not the only thing I'm working on –"

"When you've earned the luxury of that independence, you'll get it," Moody retorted, tossing Harry's wand back to him with a flick of his wrist. "And keep in mind I can see through Invisibility Cloaks."

But not through simulamancy, Harry thought savagely as he caught his wand and shoved it in his pocket as he got to his feet. "So I'm a prisoner, then?"

"You're a student," Moody snapped, "and like Tonks did before you, you're going to learn from me. Dumbledore may have been comfortable with you doing your own thing, but I have a different set of priorities. Consider it a learning opportunity, and you might get out of this a better man than when you were dropped in here. You've already completed your first lesson, Potter."

"What?"

"You didn't curse me when I gave you back your wand," Moody growled, slowly beginning to circle Harry. "That shows you know you made a mistake. What was that mistake, Potter?"

"Attacking Malfoy while the other students were still in the room –"

The curse was blindingly fast, and Harry found himself flat on his back. There was a scorch mark on the center of his chest, and Moody was looming over him.

"Wrong answer," Moody grated, as Harry scrambled back up to his feet. "You said you attacked that puerile little bit of filth because it insulted you, touched a nerve. Besides the fact that was unbelievably stupid, what else did he say?"

Harry racked his brain for a few seconds, and then –

"He threatened me... as if he was behind the attacks –"

"NOW do you see your stupidity?" Moody roared suddenly, his eyes both going wide. "If he was bluffing, he was able to goad you and that makes you weak, but if he was telling even an iota of the truth, you've ensured that he's going to target students again. Once again, innocents are going to get hurt – students at THIS school, under MY protection! Do you see your mistake now, Potter?"

He nodded and swallowed hard – he hadn't even thought of that...

"Look, I'm sure it felt damn good to finally shove that blond bastard into the Etching Solution," Moody said after a few seconds as he leaned against one of the desks shoved against the wall. "I've been wanting to do that to his father for over twenty-five years. But there is a time and place for that sort of vengeance, and more care is required if you wish to continue along that road. Dementors are a hell of a lot more effective than acid, Potter, don't ever forget that."

"But not nearly as satisfying," Harry muttered.

"That's what you think," Moody retorted, slamming his fist down on the desk. "In any case, it's time for you to start exercising the analytical and intelligent mind you've been developing over the past few months, or so Tonks tells me. Part of this is adjusting to the new reality that this war has taken. Dumbledore gave you a Pensieve?"

"Yes."

"It's either Professor Moody or 'sir', while you're here," Moody growled, levelling his wand at Harry. "I trust you don't need to be told twice regarding this."

"Yes," Harry replied through clenched teeth. "Sir."

"You've been using that Pensieve, I'm assuming?" Moody continued, his eyes beady as they both fixed on Harry. "Getting rid of the unsavoury memories? The ones in the Ministry?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to experience those memories in your Pensieve," Moody said coolly as he began walking around the room, heading towards the massive oaken desk covered with papers. "Don't just get rid of them – I want you to experience them. Pulling them out of your mind isn't enough, because the emotion behind the memories is still there. So I want you to go into each memory in turn, and watch them. I want to desensitize you thoroughly to any brutality or horrors you might see. You obviously haven't been able to cope with the most recent additions," he added, his scarred lip curling.

"Not many people could cope with that, Professor," Harry replied, trying to maintain his composure as he approached Moody's desk.

"Damn right, and that's why everyone's not an Auror," Moody retorted. "But I'm not talking about everyone, I'm talking about you. Once you can watch them without flinching, analyze them. Note what you're doing, and what you're doing wrong. Not only will this help you when the Death Eaters come calling again, you'll also be able to control yourself regardless of what is said. Constant vigilance means more than keeping your eyes open, Potter."

"And then –"

"I'm not done," Moody snapped, his eyes flashing. "Then, after you can clearly state every error that you made in your fights, you're going to learn to never repeat those errors, and that's where I come in. And unlike all the would-be Aurors that come into my program, there's no failing out for you."

"And then...?"

"Then you can go," Moody replied, finally turning away from Harry. "Most humane people would consider that punishment enough. I wouldn't, but your discipline is not entirely up to me. In the mean time, you and I are going to find the instigator of these attacks before they strike again."

"Malfoy knows something," Harry spat.

"And you don't have an iota of proof to back it up," Moody shot back. "And it's already a case that's under advisement – as are the rest of them."

Harry looked up, and suddenly noticed it. Moody's Dark Detectors lined the walls as usual – there were a few bizarre additions – but on the single wall behind Moody's desk were hundreds of papers and wizard photographs, all magically secured to the wall in a bewildering collage. Below them were four massive stacks of books, and Harry could see the blades rustling beneath the covers of a few. And across Moody's desk were even more papers, most strewn with incomprehensible calculations and scribbling in Moody's angular handwriting.

"This wall and desk indicates every possible case that I've hypothesized regarding these attacks," Moody said tersely, his eyes scanning the wall. "And there are a lot of possibilities. Furthermore, and much to our advantage, you've already narrowed down the weapons of attack – the ghosts of Hogwarts, released or driven mad by something within the school. What is evading me is the patterns, the instigator, and how we might stop him."

"And Malfoy was one of your potential threats?" Harry asked, a little surprise creeping into his voice as he stepped closer.

"Sons of Death Eaters often become Death Eaters," Moody growled. "He's not ruled out by any stretch of the mind, and from what I've gathered from the surreptitious little spying missions I've embarked on – Invisibility Cloaks come in handy for those – he's got some interesting discrepancies lined up against him. And he fits into some extremely interesting patterns rather well."

"What about what might be causing or regulating these attacks?" Harry asked, moving closer to read one of the scribbled sheets on the wall. "If we can... wait a second, this has Hermione's name on it!"

"Course it does," Moody replied with a snort. "I'm not going to ignore the possibility that a pattern she might have discerned is valid. And she's one of the few people investigating this actively – I'm not going to disregard any advancement that she makes. Sure, she could be wrong, but I'd be a bloody fool to ignore her ideas if they're right."

"And are they right?" Harry asked sceptically.

Moody grunted. "Depending on what your idiotic little outburst brings about, we'll see."

He snapped awake violently – to pain.

It was as if someone had taken a whip of flame to every contour of his face and set fire to the rest. He could barely see out of his eyes, but as he tried to blink, his tear ducts starting leaking – and soon he couldn't stop screaming as the tears burned against his face...

"Merlin, Malfoy, shut up!"

He knew that voice. He hated that voice.

"Nott, get Madam Pomfrey now!"

"You're in the Hospital Wing, relax!" Zabini said curtly, stepping into Malfoy's field of vision. "And Pomfrey's done all she can do – you're lucky she saved your eyes –"

Malfoy looked around wildly for a second before grabbing the hand mirror from the bedside table. The image that greeted him nearly caused him to drop the mirror with shock.

Twisted and enflamed scars crossed every contour of his face, etched into his skin like a grotesque tattoo. His hairline had been brutally seared back, and had been regrown in patches. His eyes

were enflamed and puffy, the tears sizzling when they dripped into the charred scars surrounding his eyes –

"God... my god, I'm a... I..."

"The scars will get a bit better," Zabini said crisply, crossing his arms over his chest, "but you'll still have those white lines all over your face for the rest of your life. And don't touch them – there some residual Etching Solution along the scars, but that should go away."

"Much like any hope of you finding a woman," Nott finished viciously. "It's a good look for –"

Nott didn't get out another word – Malfoy had tackled him and driven him off his chair onto the floor. It was an easy thing to get a grip on his throat and squeeze –

A second later, he felt himself tearing free of Nott, and then being unceremoniously dropped on the bed. He rounded on Zabini, only to meet the tip of the Slytherin's wand.

"Throttling Nott will do nothing for this," Zabini said calmly, "and I need him alive."

"Potter."

Zabini's lips curled into a smirk. "Go on."

"Potter." The word savagely escaped his desiccated lips and burned his throat – apparently, some of the solution had gotten in his mouth. It hurt even to speak. At least I can speak... Pomfrey must have saved my tongue and teeth. "Make him suffer."

"Very eloquent –"

"Shut up, Zabini!" Malfoy snarled, forcing back a violent cough. "Nott, I've got a job for you that coincides with the mission."

"I don't take orders from –" Nott began furiously, but Zabini raised a finger to cut him off and let Malfoy speak.

"I want you to watch Potter," Malfoy began, every breath through his ravaged throat sending a fresh wave of pain through his body. "I want to take someone from him like he took someone from me. So, the next time you see that ass with a woman... she's your target. I don't care who she is, what house she's from, and I don't give a damn about any patterns – just make it work."

Nott gritted his teeth. "Guess I owe you this, considering my little 'plan' might just be the reasons why –"

"Don't fucking mince words, Nott, it was the reason I was attacked," Malfoy snarled. "I played your decoy, and I lost most of my face so that the target could be on my head instead of yours. Neither of us expected this from Potter. We screwed up, but the Dark Lord will be pleased, and he has ways of fixing... fixing things like..."

"I don't think any of us could have expected that sort of brutality," Zabini said icily.

"But now we know – and Potter is going to pay."

Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly as he walked down one of the seventh floor corridors, the torches casting long shadows in his path. The hall almost appeared surreal – almost.

After what I've seen this year – hell, after what I've seen today - I don't think anything can seem that surreal anymore.

"Don't get down on yourself, Harry, you'll be fine."

His wand was out in a flash, as he looked around wildly for the sudden voice – only to see her leaning against a windowsill, gazing dreamily out into the sky. Her wand was also in her hand, but she was slowly winding a few strands of dirty blonde hair around it absent-mindedly. However, it wasn't any of those things that caused Harry's eyes to widen with astonishment, but rather something a bit more mortifying.

"What the... Luna, what are you doing –"

Luna was not wearing shoes – or socks. Or pants for that matter. As far as Harry could tell, all she was wearing was a very large, very baggy nightshirt that looked like it belonged to a man forty years her senior and four times her weight. For a second, Harry wondered if the strange girl was wearing anything underneath that, and he immediately flushed. This is awkward...

He coughed slightly, trying to find a way to avoid the question of Luna's attire without embarrassing her. "Uh...why are you out of bed?"

"Can't sleep," Luna said simply. "Just not tired anymore. It's been all year, you know."

"I've heard," Harry said warily, taking a step closer. Something was off about that girl – and it wasn't just most of her clothes – and he didn't relax his guard. He remember, with a pang, the Ravenclaw girls from the first attack, and he held back his shudder. She could be possessed, and I wouldn't know it until it's too late... "But what are you doing out of your dormitory?"

"I could ask you the same question, Isabelle, and you know, I think we'd both get the same answer," Luna replied cheerfully, still not meeting Harry's eyes. Her attention seemed fixed on whatever was outside. Harry frowned and stepped a little closer, trying to catch a glimpse at what Luna might be watching –

"Hmm... I don't think it's going to rain," Luna said with a little nod of certainty.

One of Harry's eyebrows shot into his fringe. "Uh... hate to break it to you, Luna, but it's been raining for the past few days all around the castle –"

"That's around, Harry, not here," Luna said, finally turning giving Harry a small, secret smile. "After all, just because Wrackspurts might be flying around your head doesn't mean there's one inside you. Of course, when everything catches up, it might make you a little fuzzy, but if you're quick, you'll have time to get back into the cloud."

Harry didn't have the faintest idea what a Wrackspurt was – he thought Luna had mentioned them before, but her strange attire was driving any other thoughts clean out of his head. No wonder people call her Loony Lovegood sometimes...

"I think," Luna said with a pleased nod, "that we should go outside."

Harry sputtered for a second. "What? But Luna... you're... uh, well, you're not..."

"See, you let the Wrackspurt get into your head, Isabelle," Luna said, shaking her head. "I told Professor Flitwick that we need to get somebody from the Department of Mysteries to get these things out of here –"

"Luna, you're hardly wearing anything!"

"Oh, I know," Luna said simply, straightening the nightshirt on her shoulders and pulling her wand free of her hair. "It's night-time, and this is what I wear to bed. Belonged to my grandfather, you know."

"Uh, Luna... you're not in bed," Harry said bracingly, taking a hesitant step closer to the girl. Maybe she's sleepwalking or something... either that or clinically insane...

"I know – the bed didn't want to follow me," Luna replied matter-of-factly as she began walking down the hallway, Harry by her side. "The floor's a little cold, you know."

"You're not wearing shoes, Luna."

"Isabelle, I told you, it's night-time," Luna said patiently. "You don't wear shoes at night – it would be uncomfortable when you're sleeping."

"But you – look, never mind, but why do you keep calling me –"

"Ah, here we are!" Luna said cheerfully, reaching a section of completely blank wall. It was very dark, and Harry lit his wand with a

muttered word, watching as Luna touched the wall thoughtfully and appeared to thoughtfully stroke one of the stones as she whistled under her breath.

"Come on, door, stop pretending..."

Harry shook his head with amazement. He knew there were doors in Hogwarts that were just walls pretending – it was magic, he guessed, thought he couldn't imagine why – but he hadn't heard of many of the opposite – and he had never heard of talking to one before. Maybe it's a secret passage...

A second later, his eyes widened with amazement as roughly a dozen stones became abruptly translucent before vanishing entirely, leaving an irregularly sized hole in the wall of Hogwarts. Then, without warning, Luna hopped through the hole... onto the narrow battlements below.

"Come on, Harry!"

"Aren't you cold?" Harry called, moving to the entry with concern as Luna began walking across the narrow stone walkway. The wind was chilly, and blowing with considerable intensity – not to mention it was quite dark.

Luna waved away Harry's concern and kept walking, her eyes tracing the night skyline with an expression of wonder across her face. Harry paused for a few seconds to think – he had never been up on the battlements of Hogwarts before, and the stone walkway didn't appear to be reinforced by much of anything...

"Oh, fuck it," he muttered, before dropping onto the walkway and hurrying after Luna, who had finally stopped at the center of the walkway, gazing out across the Hogwarts grounds with a contented smile on her face.

"It's bright out," Luna said as Harry caught up with her. "Lot of stars tonight."

"Don't know how you can tell through those clouds," Harry muttered, shivering. "Look, Luna, we should get back inside, at least so you can get a cloak or something –"

"You know that it's raining, Harry?" Luna asked suddenly, her gaze snapping to Harry as she leaned against the crenellations, her dreamy expression returning as she raised her wand.

"Luna... god, Luna, it's not raining –"

"Yes, it is," Luna interrupted, pointing at the sky, her smile widening. "See that arc? Just behind it, it's raining. And there... and there... all around us."

Harry was about to say something, but he looked... and paused. Even though it was dark - not very dark, as he noted with a jolt of surprise, there was still plenty of light to see the horizon line – he could see the curtains of rain falling across the sky all across the sky, all around them. Everywhere... except Hogwarts.

"Why isn't it raining here?" Harry whispered. "And the clouds don't look like they're the same colour..."

"We aren't there yet," Luna said lightly, absent-mindedly toying with the hem of her nightshirt. "Or at least I don't think we are... we could be past there, but I don't think so – otherwise everything would be a lot wetter. It rained a bit this evening, but not like that."

"The rain's not touching Hogwarts," Harry whispered. "What the hell is going on... and why is it so bright outside? It's like the sun's going to rise..."

His voice trailed off as he looked at the sky. It was a deep royal purple, but he could see the flickering of pink in the east... the sun could be rising, but it was much too early for that... something wasn't making sense...

"The clouds are darker than the sky."

Luna raised her wand, and with a muttered word, a bright ball of light soared from its tip, straight up towards the sky. It was like the lantern of a Hinkypunk, and Harry couldn't help but watch it as it soared higher and higher... and then vanished.

"Hmm..." Luna said to herself. "It's going away faster."

"Luna, what was that?" Harry asked, the first tremors of fear filling his gut. "Where did your light go?"

"Away," Luna said simply. "It's interesting how that happens. I don't think it's now anymore, though."

Harry frowned again, trying to piece his way through Luna's sentence. "That... Luna, that sentence makes no sense."

Luna shook her head sadly. "I wish it didn't make sense, but it does. It should be now, but it's not... and I don't know why. I don't think the Freyanwisp took it... I wish it did."

"Okay, Luna, you're not making any sense at all," Harry said, his patience beginning to strain. More than ever, he wished that Tonks or Sirius were here – at least they talked sensibly. "What's a 'Freyanwisp, and what do you know about why everything outside Hogwarts seems to be moving faster –"

"Don't be silly, Isabelle, Freyanwisps don't exist, or at least not in this view of the world," Luna said patiently. Her expression suddenly grew wistful, and Harry suddenly felt Luna's hand slip into his. "I wish they did exist – I really do. It would make things a bit better."

The sadness in Luna's voice hit Harry like a sledgehammer, and he swallowed hard, shoving back his emotion as he tightened his grip on Luna's small hand. "I... yeah, I wish I could find something to make things... better."

There was silence for a long few seconds, and for a moment, Harry thought he could see the sparkle of a star, lost behind the bulwark of clouds...

"Isabelle, will you stay with me until the clouds come back?" Luna whispered. "Not those ones – the big dark ones, that make everyone think it'll be okay."

"Will they?" Harry asked quietly. "Make... everyone think it'll be okay?" He didn't know where the words were coming from, but it seemed like Luna was scared of something – something that she couldn't even put to words, as if words couldn't really describe what she was thinking. As if it was beyond even her imagining. The tremor of fear was back, but this fear was different. This wasn't something in his face, something that he could fight or kill. This was different – it was unknown, and downright terrifying.

Luna looked up at Harry. "It's worked so far... at least I hope it has. If the sun shone all the clearer, it would begin skipping, and people wouldn't understand, and they'd get scared. Isabelle, can you stay with me?"

"I... I guess I can," Harry said hesitantly, following Luna to the edge of the battlements. Carefully, the two of them got onto one of the thicker crenellations, wide and stable enough that it made a surprisingly good – if a bit vertigo-inducing – seat. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Why do you keep calling me Isabelle?"

Luna laughed lightly, and in an instant, the tension and fear in Harry's heart lightened. As long as he could hear Luna's laugh – that carefree innocence, the antithesis of everything Voldemort proclaimed and fought for, everything Harry wanted to fight for...

I think I made a friend... and I didn't even realize it.

He couldn't help it. He laughed too – the first time he had truly laughed in a long time - and for a few seconds, they both laughed together on the top of the wall of Hogwarts Castle. It was quiet, it was simple – and it was beautiful.

"So, why do you keep calling me Isabelle?" Harry asked as he held Luna's hand lightly and stared out at the majestic open sky, now tinged mauve from the flickers of pink on the horizon.

Luna smiled. "You're being silly, Harry."

The landing on the crumpled masonry was harder than the last time... or was it the time before that? It was beginning to blur – in and out of the same memory, the same hell...

He could still feel the raging heat of the flames, and even though he knew they couldn't hurt him, he could still feel a trickle of sweat sliding down the back of his neck –

"Expelliarmus!"

The voice was ragged, and unmistakeably female, but he knew who had shouted that spell. With horrified fascination, he watched as the spell smashed the hasty Shield Charm, ripping the arm from the Hit Wizard's body with the gory wet snap of breaking bones...

He knew what was coming, so he looked away. He didn't want to have to witness the massacre all over again. It would be impossible to ignore, but his job wasn't merely desensitization, but also an analysis of his mistakes – the mistakes that Tonks, as his doppelganger, had made.

She faced Scrimgeour alone, the other Hit Wizards and Aurors charging after the dark-haired woman who was slaughtering them with grossly exaggerated spells. He watched as the Metamorphmagus fought off Scrimgeour's furious spells and curses with surprising deftness and dexterity...

Something was wrong.

He moved closer, and then he noticed Tonks' hesitation after every spell. Her reaction time was slowed, without the usual graceless intensity she possessed. It was as if she was pretending to be inexperienced – which made sense, he realized, considering who she was impersonating.

Her spells were still powerful, though – Scrimgeour was driven back a few steps by a nasty jinx that was parried at the last second. He wondered why Tonks didn't immediately press the advantage – he would have, even despite his relative inexperience...

He saw the anxiety playing across Tonks' face mirroring his own – and the look of rage and betrayal on Scrimgeour's visage as the Auror leapt back on the attack with a string of curses that Tonks blocked just in time –

He heard screams, and he looked back – and then immediately wished he hadn't. The dark-haired girl – his simulacrum, but still him all the same – had just unleashed a black cloud from her wand, and he could see the Hit Wizards convulse as the cloud touched them, their heads spasmodically twitching, as if to burst...

He wrenched his gaze away, but he could still hear the sickeningly wet cracks behind him as the ground ruptured beneath his feet. Any second now –

The ground blew open. Charlie and the twins were streaking up through the hole, building speed with every second...

He heard a howl, and he twisted his glance back to Tonks – she had lost her footing for a second, and that had caused her to fumble. Her wand was blown out of her hand by Scrimgeour's hex.

He had seen enough.

With little more than a thought he shot up faster than the Weasleys were flying, up and up... until he felt himself stagger back from Pensieve, breathing heavily as struggled to regain his footing.

"You didn't stay until the end."

Harry wiped the sheen of sudden sweat from his forehead and glared at Moody, who was on the opposite side of the Pensieve. "I've lived through it, and you've made me watch that nightmare five times – I think I know the ending."

Moody's eyes both narrowed as he stepped around the Pensieve towards his desk – towards Harry. "You think you know where you went wrong?"

"Yes," Harry replied through clenched teeth.

"Description, now."

"Scrimgeour was faster than I was," Harry began, taking a deep breath and staring straight into Moody's mismatched eyes. "That shouldn't be the case – I'm a good Seeker, and I've got better reflexes than that. I was destabilized by the collapsing environment, which I should have been blocking out –"

"What else?" Moody growled. "You know there's more!"

"I was holding back," Harry continued, still on the same breath, "because Scrimgeour intimidated me, considering our prior dealings this year –"

"Explains why you didn't go to Azkaban for what happened in the summer, but that's not difficult to figure out, considering whatever you planned had Black's and Tonks' fingerprints all over it," Moody said darkly. "Take a breath, and tell me what else you did wrong – NOW!"

"I was distracted –"

"By what?"

"- By the brutality of my... of my ally's tactics!" Harry finished, out of breath, finally tearing his gaze away from Moody's eyes. "I didn't... I didn't expect for her to be using spells like she did –"

"Yeah, using Unforgivables will do that," Moody said harshly, stepping around to his desk, his electric-blue eye still fixed on Harry. "Especially when they hit your best friend's brother –"

The feelings he had been holding back broke loose, and he could feel the rage, the mingled guilt and fury that made him want to make whatever hurt him burn –

"SHUT UP!"

Moody paused for a few seconds, and turned to face Harry, a strange expression on his scarred face. "What did you say to me, Potter?" he asked quietly, an ominous note in his voice.

"Shut up about that," Harry whispered, his breaths coming in hot gasps as rage filled his stomach. "Shut the... fuck... up."

Moody crossed his arms over his chest and surveyed Harry. His expression was inexplicable, and strangely, Harry felt the anger leaking out of him like a hole in a balloon. He felt deflated, vacantly staring as Moody met his gaze again.

"Congratulations, Potter," Moody said with a grunt. "You've just passed your second lesson. Do you hate me yet?"

The word 'Yes' leapt to his tongue in a second, but for some strange reason he couldn't say it. Maybe because the feelings of hatred and loathing that he had felt towards Moody in those furious seconds weren't really there at all... just resignation.

"No," he finally said.

"Why?" Moody asked sharply. "I've made you relive this five times. For most intents and purposes, this would be considered torture."

"Torture was living through it the first time," Harry whispered, putting a hand to his head to fight the rising ache in his temple. "This..."

"Sit down, Potter."

He started for a second, fighting back the queer daze as he stumbled into a chair Moody had conjured out of thin air.

"What if I were to tell you," Moody said after a long few seconds, neither of his eyes meeting Harry, instead scanning the mosaic of paperwork strewn across the wall, "that what we just went through in the Pensieve was not desensitization training, but something different?"

"W-What?" Harry asked, startled.

"You're feeling guilt, Potter," Moody said bluntly, pressing both of his hands on his desk as he stared at a confused Harry. "An extraordinary amount of it – for a number of things, I'm guessing, but for Charlie Weasley's death in particular. You believe that you should have been able to prevent it, that it shouldn't have happened."

"Well, of course I –"

"Let me finish," Moody snapped. "Potter, that feeling is making you act irrationally. Furthermore, it is depriving you of your common sense and reasoning. Thus, I'm here to prove that it's irrelevant."

Harry's mouth fell open. "You're saying –"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Potter," Moody warned, raising a deformed finger. "I'm saying the feeling is irrelevant – not the fact. It might be a fact that you could not have saved Mr. Weasley, but do you think he'd want you to honour him by losing your mind and giving Malfoy an acid wash?"

Harry paused, his eyebrows rising. "Well, actually –"

"Bad example," Moody said curtly. "My point is that these feelings get in the way and ruin a lot of good people, Aurors and Hit Wizards included."

"You're saying I just shouldn't care?"

"I told you not to put words in my mouth, Potter! Did I say 'don't care'? Did I tell you to become a sociopath?" Moody snarled.

"No, but –"

"No, what I'm trying to enforce upon you is that while these emotions make you human, they also make you a dangerous liability if they're uncontrolled," Moody finished, pressing a palm down on the desk as he pointed at Harry. "You need to learn that emotional control – you have a good sense of self in fighting off the Imperius Curse, but this is different – and part of that control is facing and dealing with the issue

at hand before gaining closure. And you're already moving towards it – getting your emotions out through screaming tends to be effective." Moody grunted as he pulled out his desk chair with a kick of his wooden leg. "Not to mention therapeutic."

Harry was silent as he watched Moody sit down opposite him as his own mind tried to pull itself together. He was feeling guilt for Charlie – justified guilt, though Moody would never need to know that – but maybe the old Auror was right. Maybe there was something he could use to block it out, so the rage wouldn't take control...

Pulling open one of his desk drawers, Moody pulled a heavy-looking leather-bound book from his desk drawer and tossed it open upon his desk. "Now some would advocate 'cures' like Occlumency or Dreamless Sleep potions as a way of attaining that emotional control, but I don't buy it. That's escapism – that's blocking away the grief and rage, not dealing with it. No, I believe in the old way of dealing with this – an Auror-style debriefing."

"Okay," Harry said uncertainly, thinking fast. He can't find out about simulamancy, and he can't find out about who –

"So who was your 'ally' in the Ministry fight?" Moody asked suddenly, yanking a quill from his desk and beginning to scribble, one eye fixed on Harry while the other watched the parchment.

"Does it matter?" Harry muttered.

"Damn well it does," Moody replied sharply, glaring at Harry as he continued to write. "Considering you want her dead, I consider it highly relevant. Who is she?"

"It's my business," Harry said stiffly.

"Did I say you were allowed to have secrets?" Moody growled.

"This one, sir, is personal," Harry retorted, matching Moody's glare. "I'll deal with her when the time is opportune."

Moody glared at Harry for a long few seconds. "I didn't become an Auror just because I was skilled with a wand, Potter. It would make my investigation a hell of a lot easier if you told me the truth about this."

"Probably, but that's not going to happen," Harry replied evenly. "This is between Tonks and I, and if you trust both of us –"

"I'm sorry, when did I ever say that I trust you?"

" –Fine, trust Tonks then!" Harry exclaimed angrily. "It's a personal score, and I will deal with it."

Moody's glare intensified for a few seconds before he turned back to his paper, and Harry couldn't help but breathe a silent sigh of relief. It's a stalling tactic, and Moody's probably going to investigate anyways, but this should hold him off...

"How did you get into the Ministry, Potter?"

"Portkey," Harry replied immediately. "Came in with Tonks."

"And I'm assuming you had a reason to be there?" Moody growled.

Harry clenched his fist under his desk. "We leaked the information regarding my case to the international journalists, to encourage an investigation that would discredit Fudge –"

"Won't work," Moody interrupted flatly. "Everything will be held behind closed doors, and the Prophet won't report a damn thing."

"We handled the Prophet," Harry replied coolly, crossing his arms over his chest. "It was actually surprisingly easy, with the right leverage."

Moody paused for a few seconds before fixing Harry with a dangerous stare. "Blackmail?"

"Effectively," Harry replied.

A crooked smirk crept onto Moody's face. "Knew you had a brain somewhere, Potter. Now, I haven't seen any articles in the Prophet proclaiming your innocence, but that's only a matter of time?"

Harry thought for a couple of seconds. It was strange that nothing had been printed – but then again, Paulus Amoccio was probably still gathering evidence. "It's coming," he said carefully. "I'm not sure when, but it is coming."

"And what would you know about those explosions that ripped a hole in the middle of the Ministry?" Moody growled, his tone abruptly harsh as he continued to write furiously. "The Ministry will have commissioned a full investigation by now, and I suspect warrants for the Weasley twins will have already been distributed, but they aren't the backing force behind that." He drew a line across his paper, deliberately creating a new section with a slow, controlled motion. "And I suspect you know exactly who was behind that."

Harry shifted uneasily. "They weren't my idea – I mean, I wanted a distraction, but I wasn't planning on something of that scale –"

"Of course you weren't, but you know who was," Moody interrupted, looking up, his beady eye gleaming. "And so do I – I've seen this sort of thing before from Nathan Cassane."

Harry's mouth fell open. How did he –

"Rest assured, Potter, Cassane will have covered his tracks – he's very good at that – but it begs the question why he chose to get involved at all," Moody said curtly. "Did you ask him to bomb the Ministry?"

"No, I –"

"But you did speak to him before you went into the Ministry?"

Where's he going with this? Harry thought, scratching his temple. "Yeah, I spoke to him. Figured he could get me to the journalists without any problems. Then I heard about Malfoy's attack on my vaults and things got... sidetracked."

"I can imagine," Moody growled, scribbling faster. "I need to talk to Tonks, see what she's got on this, there are pieces missing here..."

"Professor, where are we going with –"

Moody's palm slammed against the table with an abrupt bang. "Potter, let me be very clear on something: while your emotional and mental stability is of paramount importance to us right now – or at least it should be – there is one person in our world whose instability I have more reason to be concerned about, because I've seen the direct ramifications of said instability."

"You... you're talking about Cassane," Harry said slowly, his mind racing.

"I warned Dumbledore he was a loose cannon – one far looser than even I had predicted," Moody snarled, his eyes snapping up. "This will get bad very quickly, unless we take action – otherwise others will take advantage of this, those who have recognized Cassane's... behaviour in the past, and who can identify it."

"Voldemort?"

"At this particular moment, worse," Moody said grimly. "Scrimgeour."

Scrimgeour drummed his fingers on the arms of his office chair. One of the first to be repaired in the two weeks after the attack, he could still smell the thin odour of conjured cement throughout the room. His window was dark, and he had dimmed most of the candles in his office, leaving only a large, palely-glowing Sneakoscope to emit any sort of light. A dark mood, for a dark meeting. Maybe this will convince them of the gravity of this situation...

The door opened, and Scrimgeour saw Kingsley Shacklebolt step in and give his superior a crisp nod, devoid of emotion.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Close the door, Shacklebolt."

Shacklebolt closed the door quietly. "It's a little dark in here."

"It sets the mood," Scrimgeour replied tersely, motioning for the Auror to sit down. "It also ensures that we won't be overheard."

Shacklebolt's expression was blank – carefully so, Scrimgeour noted with a grim smile – as he took the seat opposite Scrimgeour. "I'm assuming you have a good reason for calling me in, Rufus."

"Let's cut to the chase, then," Scrimgeour replied curtly. "Shacklebolt, I know you have aspirations towards my position –"

"With all due respect, sir –"

"But with the current situation in the department, I'm willing to overlook that," Scrimgeour interrupted, his eyes glittering. "I hope your integrity allows you to put the needs of the Ministry over your own ambitions."

"That should not be difficult, Rufus," Shacklebolt said with a shrug, "as I'm not angling for your position. Your Sneakoscope can prove that."

"I've disabled it," Scrimgeour replied smoothly, folding his hands carefully. "After all, this is the Ministry – the shrieking gets annoying, and it serves as a handy bluff. But I'll take your sincerity as a given, in this case."

"I'd hope, Rufus, you could take my sincerity as a given all the time," Shacklebolt said with a sigh. "I'm not a liar or traitor, as you know."

"Which is why I'm pulling you off of the Sirius Black case."

Shacklebolt didn't betray any signs of surprise, but his eyebrow rose. "Might I ask why?"

"Because you are currently one of my best investigators," Scrimgeour growled, "and I need answers in a hurry regarding the attacks upon the Ministry."

"I wasn't even at the Ministry –"

"I know, you were guarding the Minister," Scrimgeour said impatiently. "But answers are still required. Fortunately for you, we already have a suspect."

He slid the black case file across the desk to Shacklebolt, who opened and scanned it with interest, lighting his wand with a muttered word for more light.

"This isn't Lucius Malfoy."

"I know that," Scrimgeour snapped, "and it wouldn't make sense in any case. Malfoy has no reason to attack the Ministry – he makes too much money off of it."

"The Hit Wizards allowed the goblins to reduce Malfoy Manor to cinders," Shacklebolt replied incredulously, "and you're saying he's not involved in this?"

"That was a different issue," Scrimgeour said tensely, "while not unrelated, I can assure you Malfoy is not the culprit. Keep reading."

Shacklebolt held Scrimgeour's gaze for a long few seconds before turning back to the case file. Scrimgeour watched the Auror's eyes descend down the page, and then stop.

The change in Shacklebolt's body language was immediate. His lips tensed, his neck stiffened, his shoulders straightened.

"You understand, then, why we must keep this quiet."

"Rufus, this is a grave accusation."

"And one the evidence supports – he was the only one to have contact with Potter, and given the incarceration of Charles Weasley, he would have been able to easily manipulate the younger brothers to his cause." Scrimgeour's hand curled into a fist. "And it is not like this hasn't happened before."

"You made a deal with Potter," Shacklebolt said slowly. "That's how he was able to –"

"A bargain I regret with each passing second, but that matters little right now," Scrimgeour growled. "I think you understand why I brought you in on this."

"You're accusing a very powerful man of treason –"

"I'm giving him a chance to come quietly, to explain his actions," Scrimgeour snapped.

Shacklebolt eyed the Head Auror. "You know he won't do that."

"He's a reasonable man. It shouldn't be an issue."

"The public won't like this. Cassane's appointment was well-received, even though he replaced Dumbledore. The Prophet will have a field day –"

"Another reason I'm keeping this quiet," Scrimgeour hissed, gesturing towards the door. "You think I don't know that this could be disastrous –"

"And what if he's guilty?"

Scrimgeour gave no response, and Shacklebolt swore in amazement.

"Rufus, you're barking. We can't –"

"He's under the law, just like anyone else."

"Rufus, you don't understand," Shacklebolt said, a hint of anxiousness in his voice as he ran a hand over his bald head. "While I would have no qualms arresting him like any other criminal, we might not be able to. Cassane is one of the most powerful wizards of his generation – there's only two men who would reliably be able to bring him down alive. Only Dumbledore and –"

Shacklebolt's voice cut off, and Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed.

"You were about to say Voldemort, weren't you?"

Shacklebolt's eyes were unreadable, but his expression was grim. "You know he's alive and active."

"Did Dumbledore tell you that?"

"I deduced it for myself, and there's a wealth of evidence to support it," Shacklebolt replied calmly. "And our world would be a better place with that knowledge openly accepted. You still don't believe, do you?"

"There have been an awful lot of coincidences in our world over the past few months," Scrimgeour returned irritably. "Whether we can lay them at the hands of Dumbledore, Potter, Voldemort, or even Sirius Black remains up to debate. I will say this: if I was Minister, this would be a much simpler matter. Fudge's bellicose antagonism towards Dumbledore's assertions is not making our lives any easier. But right now, even that option seems nebulous at best."

He couldn't help but let frustration into his tone: Fudge, under Umbridge's advisement, had moved with startling and uncharacteristic speed and conviction after the attacks, and his popularity had soared. While casting the Malfoys as scapegoats had not gone over entirely well with some, it had placated the goblins enough to begin tentative negotiations. Fudge profited from all the lives that my Aurors gave, Scrimgeour thought savagely. I'll be sure to mention that when Voldemort openly moves...

"Politics aside, how do you plan to arrest Cassane?" Shacklebolt asked coolly.

"He's agreed to a clandestine meeting in this office, and he will be here in a few minutes," Scrimgeour replied, motioning for Shacklebolt to take a position behind him. "Though he won't realize it, I have six Aurors ready to Apparate if the meeting sours. For once, I have all the cards." The grim smile returned to his face. "If he's guilty, he's not getting away."

"And Black? Who's taking over his investigation?"

"I'm reassigning Wilson to the investigation, and Bones has agreed to allow Sanders to continue on the case."

"You do know Sanders is on Umbridge's personal payroll," Shacklebolt said in a low voice.

"Then it's exactly where I want him."

Rita Skeeter could hardly believe her ears. It was impossible, unbelievable...

And from the looks of this paperwork, it could all be true.

She snapped her gaze up at the thin man with the unkempt, patchy beard. "You're sure about this? That this is all true?"

"I would not give it to you if it weren't the truth," Paulus Amoccio said quickly, his eyes darting around the room nervously. "This is a sworn statement from Harry Potter himself, and Albus Dumbledore's signature is here –"

"Just because they signed it doesn't mean it's the truth," Rita exclaimed angrily, tapping the papers angrily. "You independently verified everything here?"

"The story makes sense –"

"Just because a story makes sense doesn't mean it's valid!" Rita snapped, flipping through the papers. Her anger was only partially real – her heart was hammering with gleeful anticipation – but she had to be sure. With allegations like these... like these, for instance? The statement that Potter did not blow up Ollivanders', but that it was renegade Death Eaters instead? Or that the Zabini family has been funnelling money to the Malfoys, who have been financing said Death Eaters – actually, considering the way the Ministry's treating the Malfoys, that might go over quite well –"

"The financial data can be supported," Amoccio said firmly, his accent a delight to Rita's ears – but not nearly as much of a delight as the pile of financial documents that the Sicilian reporter pulled from his bag. "I think this should be sufficient."

"Where did you... how did... these are..." Rita could hardly put words together as she rifled through the papers eagerly. "This is incredible! Unbelievable? How did you get these?"

"The Department of Magical Finance, while offsite from the Ministry proper, was in complete disarray when I began my search," Amoccio said smugly. "The destruction of the bank and the goblin currency crisis, albeit brief, had them worrying about a lot bigger things than a heap of papers. Besides, I had 'executive clearance'."

"Thank Merlin the Ministry did something right, getting the Galleon back... wait one damn second!" Rita said, her eyes narrowing. "How the hell did you, a foreign journalist, managed to net executive clearance? I've been fighting for that for years!"

"I have friends in high places," Amoccio said with an insufferable smile.

"Don't give me that load of shit, how did you get these?" Rita continued, her nostrils flaring dangerously.

Amoccio huffed and scratched his beard. "If you must know, a former Department of Finance employee was listed as a contact in the folder I was given – her name is at the bottom there –"

"Fleur Delacour," Rita breathed excitedly. "Brilliant – a Triwizard Champion to boot, this is fantastic..."

"Well, I contacted her, and she spoke to her benefactor on my behalf," Amoccio finished with a smile.

"She has sworn statements here... enough documentation to demand inquiries into Fudge's office... a paper signed by Harry Potter and Dumbledore alleging Umbridge used Blood Quills at Hogwarts without jurisdiction – oh, that's brilliant, her career's over... and so is

Cuffe's and Kemester's by the look of it, what scandals... and everything tied off with a joint statement from Dumbledore and Potter stating innocence and that..."

Rita's breath caught in her throat, and she looked up at Amoccio. "The Prophet can't print this – not this last part."

"Where Potter and Dumbledore state that... that..."

"That part will cause a panic, and we don't need that right now," Rita said forcefully, pressing the paper down on the table. "What we need is to frame all of these documents into a workable article – an indictment that will land us the cover and a place in wizarding history. And for that all we need is..."

The barn owl flew through Rita's window before she could say another word, and Amoccio – who seemed to be expecting the arrival, snagged the small bit of parchment looped around the owl's leg and passed it to Rita.

"What's this?"

"My benefactor's identity," Amoccio said with a small, secret smile, "and a little offer."

Rita wasn't listening anymore. The words on the page were printed in stark clarity in her mind, as dizzying possibilities of what she would do with her fame and wealth exploded into her mind. She could see it already – greatest English reporter of the century, exposing corruption and bringing the truth to the nation and the world...

All because of a single note. She read it again, just to make sure she wasn't dreaming...

Miss Skeeter,

I request your presence at Cassane Manor at precisely noon tomorrow, in which I will both provide concrete support for the papers delivered here, and a full, extensive interview. Bring a bottle of scotch – it will be a long afternoon, and I'd hate to be without refreshment.

Sincerely,

Nathan Cassane

Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards

"Well?" Amoccio asked after a few seconds, his smile growing wider.

"If you can hammer this into a workable draft by noon tomorrow, I'll give you full coauthor status on the article," Rita replied, shoving the papers into Amoccio's hands as she rose to her feet and yanked on her coat. "Now, if you don't mind, I've got to find the most expensive bottle of scotch in London."

It seemed like eternity, even though he knew it was only a few seconds, but Scrimgeour was patient. He knew that the man would come – his pride demanded it more harshly than any order that was given. He'll be here, if only to prove me wrong...

There was a short knock on the door, and Scrimgeour exchanged a terse glance with Shacklebolt. This was it.

"Come in."

"My, it is awfully dark in here, isn't it?" Nathan Cassane said breezily as he entered the room, surprising energy in his voice and a bounce in his step. "Mind if I cast a bit of illumination?"

"Yes, I mind," Scrimgeour said shortly, watching Cassane's movements with interest. The wizard was wearing what appeared to be a smoke-grey Muggle suit, complete with vest and bowler hat. To Scrimgeour's disgust, he looked like nothing less than a used-car salesman, with the tone and attitude to match. "Sit down, please."

"Are we going to make a deal?" Cassane asked with a charming wink as he conjured an armchair out of thin air with a wave of his wand. "Because I have plenty of good news –"

Scrimgeour's hand slammed loudly on the table, cutting off Cassane's words.

"Sit... down," Scrimgeour growled. "Enough games, Cassane – you and I know each other better than that."

Cassane shrugged and calmly took his seat, putting away his wand. "If you say so, although, you really must come to realize –"

"I don't think you realize the seriousness of this situation!" Scrimgeour snarled, slamming his hand on the desk again – only this time, it was curled into a fist. "People are dead, Cassane, and our world – yes, I said our world – is in turmoil. You have responsibilities, and it's damn time that you recognize them!"

The jovialness vanished from Cassane's expression, and even in the dim light, Scrimgeour could see the lines on the wizard's face grow deeper, as if he was visibly aging. But his eyes... no, they were always the same. They were the eyes that Scrimgeour vividly remembered: while they weren't blazing like Dumbledore's hard stare, they seemed as if they were full of some simmering fire that nobody could gauge.

Scrimgeour knew that fire. Men, good and evil, had died because of it.

"To business, then?" Cassane said calmly.

"To business," Scrimgeour growled.

"One question?"

"What?"

Cassane pointed at Shacklebolt. "Why is he here? The whole 'good-cop, bad-cop' routine doesn't work on me, you know – I practically invented it."

Shacklebolt let out a low chuckle. "I'm here for Mr. Scrimgeour's security, Mr. Cassane, nothing more."

"You trust him," Cassane said, plainly disbelieving.

"More than I trust you, that's for damned sure," Scrimgeour retorted, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Ah," Cassane said, as a disturbing glint entered his eyes and an equally unsettling smirk settled on his face. "Then you might want to ask your trusted colleague exactly why he accepted the job of guarding the Minister the day the goblins attacked."

Scrimgeour's glance snapped to Shacklebolt, but the man remained impressively stoic, his expression not even acknowledging that Cassane had said a word.

I know that expression – he's hiding something.

"Regardless, it is not Shacklebolt's actions I'm here to discuss," Scrimgeour growled, turning back to glare at Cassane, who was idly toying with his fingernails. "Don't play stupid, Nathan – it's not becoming of you."

Cassane's eyes hardened even as his smirk returned. "So for what are you accusing me for this time, Scrimgeour? As before, I've always played by the rules – your rules, as a matter of fact –"

"Lying's also not becoming of you either."

Cassane stiffened, and for a second, Scrimgeour felt a twinge of unease – Cassane was powerful. He's got a thick skin – he can handle it.

"You didn't answer my question," Cassane said coolly. "What are you accusing me of?"

"I need to know your involvement in the Ministry bombing," Scrimgeour replied grimly, "and keep well in mind where all the evidence points."

The veiled threat was obvious to everyone in the room, but Cassane simply rose to his feet, still idly scratching at his fingernails, as if he

was attempting to pry flicks of dirt from beneath them. Scrimgeour watched him closely, waiting for the moment when –

"Tell me something," Cassane asked suddenly, his gaze snapping to Scrimgeour with startling intensity. "Do you believe?"

"In what?" Scrimgeour snapped.

Cassane laughed, and as it always had, the rollicking sound seemed to brighten the room – something Scrimgeour did not appreciate.

"That's a damned good question, Rufus," Cassane said lightly, returning to his fingernails as he began to move towards the oversized Secrecy Sensor. "Typically, what one believes is held to be true by the believer – only a fool believes in a lie that he knows is a lie, and you're no fool, Rufus."

"What are you getting at?"

"Well, I'm sure you have, on your desk, a heap of evidence that points towards my guilt," Cassane continued, his tone still light and conversational as he placed his hand on the shelf. "You've worked with me in the past, you know my record, you know my current position, and most importantly, you know what I believe. Shouldn't that satisfy your inquiries?"

"Beliefs change, Cassane," Scrimgeour said grimly, crossing his arms over his chest. "As you undoubtedly know, Harry Potter and I made a deal in the Hog's Head, and I believed he could be trusted."

"He still can," Cassane said quietly.

Scrimgeour took a deep breath as he fought to control his temper. "Cassane, he was in the Ministry the day of the attack, I duelled with him myself –"

"Did you now?" Cassane said, his eyes lighting up with a sudden manic intensity. "Now I have to ask – out of curiosity, of course – are you quite sure it was him? Did he speak to you, did he attempt to kill

you... or was he only acting in self-defence, because you fired the first curse?"

Scrimgeour paused for a second as his mind raced – and then he realized that Potter hadn't said anything. And from everything I know of the boy... no, Potter is smarter than that... but it was...

"Polyjuice Potion," Shacklebolt said curtly.

"Exactly!" Cassane said triumphantly. "There's that fine Auror intellect put to work! You only fought him for a few minutes, the evidence you received that it was indeed Harry is scarce indeed!"

Scrimgeour could feel color creeping into his face. I'm not going to admit I'm wrong in front of him – not in front of Cassane, who should be the last to talk –

"So if it wasn't Potter, than who was it?" he growled, pulling a quill out and opening his ink bottle. "Traitors? Dumbledore's agents? Death Eaters?"

Cassane stopped speaking in mid-word, as a look of dawning comprehension crossed his face, as if he had just found a piece in the puzzle that he only now realized was critical.

"So you believe, then," he said very quietly, his eyes returning to his fingernails. "Interesting indeed."

"What?" Scrimgeour said sharply.

"You believe that Voldemort is back, don't you?" Cassane asked, his expression unreadable as he drew his wand and began spinning it around his fingers with remarkable dexterity. Both Shacklebolt and Scrimgeour tensed, but Cassane kept talking. "You believe that he is once again active."

"Do you believe that?" Scrimgeour retorted harshly.

"I believe Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, and the orgy of evidence that I've seen stacked in favour of the belief that the Dark Lord Voldemort has

regained his body," Cassane replied evenly. "The Death Eaters are operating with unprecedented coordination – in the same afternoon, they managed to free Severus Snape from Ministry custody, attack you and Mr. Potter at the Hog's Head, and attempt to attack my own place of residence."

"That wasn't reported," Shacklebolt said suspiciously. "That they attacked your house."

Cassane gave the dark-skinned Auror a condescending look that Scrimgeour remembered – and hated. "Shacklebolt, it's me. Or more importantly, my house – it's a better bodyguard than any dozen Hit Wizards or Aurors."

Scrimgeour's jaw clenched, and he throttled back his urge to strangle Cassane.

"But that's hardly important," Cassane continued blithely, turning to meet Scrimgeour's hostile expression. "What is relevant is that you believe."

"It makes sense that Lord Voldemort has returned," Scrimgeour growled though clenched teeth after a few seconds. "So you're suggesting that Death Eaters bombed the Ministry?"

"It makes a hell of a lot more sense than saying I did it," Cassane replied, raising an eyebrow. "Didn't you spot Lucius Malfoy himself in the Ministry? While he might not have been involved in the bombing, he could have coordinated the attack –"

"That makes no goddamn sense!" Scrimgeour snapped, slamming his fist on the desk. "We have eyewitnesses saying that the Weasley twins were supporting the attack, and they would never work with a Malfoy!"

Cassane rolled his eyes. "Rufus, Polyjuice... Potion. The Death Eaters aren't new at this, you know!"

Scrimgeour forced back his anger at the infuriating wizard standing across from him as he began furiously rifling through his papers.

"Looking for something?" Cassane asked brightly.

"There was a report here, that established Malfoy's alibi – aha! According to Reed Larshall, Malfoy was here to meet with Dmitri Kemester on 'discussions about the new bank' – which is credible, considering every report we've received from the goblins ties Malfoy to that issue!"

Cassane pursed his lips. "Well, it's credible, I can say that –"

"Of course it..." Scrimgeour's voice trailed off as he reread the section again. "Wait one damn second... I didn't see Kemester's name on the list of bank partners."

Cassane's expression was impassive. "And?"

"The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was kept out of the loop about this bank!" Scrimgeour snarled, cursing himself for not seeing the connection sooner. "So why the fuck would Kemester get himself involved?"

Cassane shrugged and raised his hands helplessly. "Who can say?"

"Shacklebolt, go get Bones and have her find Kemester immediately," Scrimgeour ordered dangerously. "That deranged fuck has a lot to answer for."

Shacklebolt wordlessly nodded before crossing the room. Cassane's eyes did not leave the Auror until the door shut behind him. The moment it clicked, he swivelled back.

"So you believe me?"

"Until I see the evidence, I don't trust you half as far as I can see you," Scrimgeour spat, shoving his papers back into the folder. "And besides, I'm not going to forget twenty years of history overnight."

Cassane's eyes narrowed dangerously as he crossed the room, looking the Head Auror dead in the eye. "So now the truth comes out."

"I know your history, Nathan," Scrimgeour said coldly, "and you have a lot to answer for – not to mention an understandable... concern with elements of the Ministry."

"You said yourself beliefs change."

"Not fast enough for some people," Scrimgeour snarled, shooting to his feet to meet Cassane face-to-face. "And I'm one of those people."

"The classic argument," Cassane said coolly, the simmering fire in his eyes revealing his tightly controlled fury. "But then again, you know exactly what I did – and thanks to Crouch, it was all legal –"

"That doesn't make it right!"

"And what would you know of rightness?" Cassane asked, his tone as biting as it was ruthlessly disdainful.

Scrimgeour's temper snapped. Before he could stop himself, he had seized the front of Cassane's shirt.

"Am I supposed to just believe when I hear you speak?" Scrimgeour hissed.

"It would do you a big favour," Cassane returned with a shrug, "considering how often I'm right."

"You ruined lives, Nathan!" Scrimgeour snarled, his hands shaking. "And not just the families you went after, your own command! If the wizarding world knew what you did to them –"

"They'd burn you as well as me," Cassane whispered fiercely, "because you knew the entire time, and then ruined a few lives of your own covering it up."

"I was under orders!"

"So was I," Cassane replied icily. "You have to remember that, Rufus – it's that fun little double-standard that we played –"

"The wizarding world would understand what I did, and the position that gave me the legitimacy to act as I did!" Scrimgeour roared. "You think they'd do the same for you? I was a force of law, Nathan – and what were you?"

"The ones who finished the job the law couldn't," Cassane replied, his voice hardly raising above a whisper.

"We all lost people, Nathan – it's not a good reason to do what you did. Do you think Cassie or Phoebe would have condoned what you did?"

Cassane froze, and a second later, the Sneakoscope exploded on Scrimgeour's shelf, peppering them both with hot glass. The Secrecy Sensor was next, melting into a smouldering wreck that sparked and hissed.

Scrimgeour knew he had touched the nerve.

"Well, would they?"

Cassane snapped up, seizing Scrimgeour's wrist and tearing it away from his shirt, slamming the Auror's hand on the table with furious strength. His eyes weren't simmering anymore – they were burning with an awful light, of anguish and loss, fused into a core of white-hot rage. For the first time in the room, Scrimgeour felt a moment of fear – and terrible, terrible sadness.

"If you mention my wife or daughter's names again," Cassane said, his voice low and strangled with emotion, "I will kill you."

"Did you attack the Ministry?" Scrimgeour whispered fiercely.

"I gave you the evidence you wanted," Cassane replied in the same awful voice. "Follow that straight to your culprits."

"Nathan, did you attack the —"

"Any other information you'll want or need from me, you'll get in the press conference statement Rita Skeeter's releasing on my behalf — which shouldn't be difficult to get print, since Harry Potter cowed Cuffe and his Prophet into compliance. Right now, though, your government is fighting the wrong war, and you're sitting on your ass." Cassane shoved away Scrimgeour's hand turned towards the door. "Fuck, for once, Dumbledore might have actually been right."

"Do you know where he is?"

"If I knew that, I would be speaking with him right now," Cassane replied curtly, without looking back, "not you." He strode towards the door.

"Wait."

Cassane turned back, the blaze in his eyes only beginning to dim. "I'm listening."

"You're working with Potter," Scrimgeour said coolly, returning to his seat and picking up his quill. "I know that."

Cassane was unmoved. "And?"

"When you see him next," Scrimgeour said, swallowing back unexpected bile in his throat, "tell him... tell him that if he was indeed not the one I was duelling, that our agreement is intact, but he owes me part of his side of the bargain. I need to know what he knows, if the Death Eaters are indeed active."

Cassane nodded as he turned back towards the door. "I'll see what I can work out."

"One more thing."

Cassane didn't turn around this time.

"With Dumbledore vanished, if you're teaching Harry anything... don't teach the son the same things you taught the father."

Cassane shook his head as he opened the door, his shoulders slightly slumping. "You never understood, Rufus. James and Lily did – they always understood."

"And they're dead," Scrimgeour said harshly. "We need Harry Potter alive."

"It's a shame that condition is relative."

And the door slammed shut.

"Okay, we're done for today," Moody said curtly, pulling his desk drawer open and dropping the smudged parchments into a folder. "That should be enough."

"Are all Auror debriefings like that?" Harry muttered, running a hand through his hair as he stifled back a yawn. It had taken four hours of uncomfortable questions before Moody had been satisfied that he knew enough.

"Not all of them, but we had a lot of information to cover," Moody replied, shoving the desk drawer closed and rising to his feet. "And from the looks of the time, it's nearly dinner."

"Didn't you have... I dunno, classes or something to teach today?" Harry asked, bewildered. "You spent the entire day here –"

Moody grunted. "Cancelled them, told the students to work on homework, except for a quick class of first years while you were in the Pensieve. What do you want for dinner, Potter?"

Harry glared at the Auror. "You're telling me that I could have –"

Moody gave Harry a smirk that showed missing teeth. "Weren't paying that much attention, were you? So what do you want to eat – I'll have the house-elves bring the basics up here and I'll go from there."

"I... damn, I don't care," Harry said, rising to his feet and moving towards the window. His back was sore from sitting all day, and it felt good to walk around the room, if only for a few minutes.

Moody nodded and cleared his throat. "Fine. Tonny!"

There was a loud crack, and a rather decrepit house-elf appeared in the room. Both of his eyes were glazed over, and he swayed on his feet as he eyed the Auror. He was wearing a Hogwarts toga, but it was utterly filthy.

"Master... Master called?" Tonny wheezed, stumbling back a step before looking up at Moody.

"The usual, for two," Moody said curtly. The house-elf nodded, and two quick cracks later, it had reappeared, bearing a massive tray filled with diced vegetables, meats, and potatoes. Moody set the tray on his desk as the house-elf vanished.

"You really don't want me to eat in the Great Hall, do you?" Harry asked, struggling to keep the frustration out of his voice. "I'm fine – the debriefing –"

"One debriefing and a round in the Pensieve does not clear as 'fine' in my thinking, Potter," Moody said roughly, as he began tossing the ingredients into a well-cleaned iron pot. "So you're going to eat with me tonight. Hell, I'm making you dinner, you should consider it a favour. Grab the plates next to the armoire, would you?"

"I'd consider it a favour if you'd let me eat downstairs with my friends," Harry replied darkly, as he pulled two dented tin plates from a small box stuffed in the corner and brought them to Moody, who was now heating the pot with repeated jabs of his wand.

Moody paused for a second to give Harry a very penetrating look. "Yeah, and who would those be? Friends, I mean."

"Ron," Harry said defensively. "Neville, the twins... uh..."

His voice trailed off as Moody took the plates from his hands. Who were his friends? Or rather, who could he trust in the same way...

"That's what I thought," Moody said with a snort as he tossed a handful of celery into the pot. "Not so many as you might think, and I wonder what you would talk about."

Harry glared at Moody and tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling in his gut that told him that Moody might have a point. "We could talk about classes or Quidditch or... hell, I dunno, girls or something –"

Moody snorted again, this time much more loudly. "Classes you don't attend, a sport you don't play, and women that you haven't spoken to. Yeah, you'd be a bloody great conversationalist, I imagine."

"Well, it's not like I can talk about anything that we talked about today, could I?" Harry snapped, his overstretched temper straining again, even as he heard the increasing truth in Moody's words. "They're sort of isolating, the things I'm working on –"

"So maybe you have more in common with me than with your 'friends'," Moody said grimly, emptying a container of spice into the pot and stirring the stew with a thick wooden spoon. "If I was less of a realist, I'd feel sorry for you."

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"This is Voldemort's doing, mostly," Moody said darkly, his electric-blue eye fixing on Harry. "Put you in positions where you can't enjoy your life, your teenage years. He tried to do the same thing to your parents and every student that came though Hogwarts when he was ascendant, and with the load of 'would-be' Death Eaters in this school, it was pretty damned easy. It was a double-edged stratagem, to be sure, but it tended to work more often than not: force them to grow up too fast, and they'll begin to forget what they're fighting for, or any sort of rules of engagement."

"I don't think Voldemort really cares if I enjoy my time at Hogwarts," Harry said warily as Moody threw a few more ingredients into the pot.

"I'm pretty sure he just wants me dead – and don't you think that's enough onions?"

"I like onions," Moody retorted, dicing the onions even finer with a jab of his wand, "and Voldemort's smarter than that. Why do you think he's attacking the school? He's not some mindless sociopath, he's got a plan. With the attacks, he spreads fear and panic, and the fact that he's willing to cross any humane boundaries of warfare by attacking children implies to some that they have to do the same, to beat that bastard. Others are so cowed they go to him, thinking under his protection, they'll be safe. He did it the first war, and he'll do it again."

"So you're saying Hogwarts was attacked when my parents were here?" Harry exclaimed, aghast. "That they went through this too?"

"Not that simple, and not like this," Moody growled, stirring the stew rigorously as he continued to prod the pot to increase the heat. "Back when he was rising to power, people knew about him, and there were groups that gave him a lot of support. Those who didn't support him – the Ministry, the Order, a bunch of scattered wizarding families – got attacked. In Hogwarts, from what Dumbledore told the Order, the school was the last 'neutral ground', so to speak, but it didn't stop what your parents coined the 'Junior Death Eaters'. Voldemort gave them orders to cause havoc in the school, but Dumbledore couldn't do much other than discipline them. I mean, expel the student and he immediately joins Voldemort or has a death sentence dropped on him and his family."

Harry swallowed hard. "That's... that's disgusting."

"Yeah, you could say that," Moody agreed, tipping some more vegetables into the pot as he jabbed his wand at a loaf of bread, which immediately began to slice itself. "On the other hand, Dumbledore liked to view Hogwarts as a place where he could redeem some of those Junior Death Eaters, give them the second chance most didn't deserve." He snorted with disgust as he glared into the pot. "Stew's looking a little runny – transfigure those plates into bowls, will you?"

Harry nodded and with a few muttered words completed the transfiguration, turning the dented tin plates into chipped plastic bowls that earned another snort from the old Auror. "You're talking about Snape, aren't you?"

"Not just that cowardly, double-crossing filth," Moody spat, doling hefty spoonfuls of stew into the bowls. "I'm talking about all the rest of them – Rosier, Wilkes, Avery, the Lestranges, Malfoy, Black –"

"Black?" Harry asked, interested.

"Sirius' younger brother, Regulus," Moody grunted as he sat down at the desk and grabbed a few hunks of roughly sliced bread. "Want something to drink?"

"Just water please," Harry said distractedly as he sat opposite Moody, pulling his chair close to the desk. "I don't remember Sirius mentioning he had a brother."

"Yeah, that break wasn't clean," Moody muttered darkly as he conjured a stream of water into Harry's glass, dunked his bread in the stew, and then popped it into his mouth. "The stupid idiot joined the Death Eaters after Sirius ran away, and the situation degenerated from there – ask Sirius about the details. All I know is that when we interrogated Mulciber, he said that Regulus Black had disappeared about a year after joining Voldemort, and neither we nor they found the body."

"Forgetting Snape for a second, did Dumbledore's plan to redeem any of the 'Junior Death Eaters' actually work?" Harry asked sceptically, already guessing the answer.

Moody frowned for a few seconds before nodding. "As a matter of fact, it did, one time. Tonks' mother, Andromeda, was a prime candidate for the Junior Death Eater crowd, considering her lineage, but Voldemort didn't count on the fact that she'd fall in love with a devilishly charming scoundrel called Ted Tonks." Moody chuckled as he took a swig from his hip-flask. "And Andromeda was just as talented as her sisters – and, of course, we got Tonks out of the deal, so I'd call that a victory."

For the first time in hours, Harry smiled as he tapped his glass with Moody's hipflask. "Yeah, I'll drink to that." They both drank deeply, and Harry tried the stew. Much to his surprise, it wasn't terrible – although it was extremely spicy and as he suspected, had way too many onions.

"So what about my parents and Sirius? They obviously didn't go bad."

Moody was quiet for a long few seconds before letting out a breath. "Yeah, they weren't bad. Joined the Order right out of school, along with Lupin and that slimeball Pettigrew. They also were working their way through the Auror program, which was a fairly common destination at the time for most of them. Pettigrew didn't have the grades to get there, even with the Ministry's desperately low standards at the time, but the rest of them did."

Harry frowned – Moody was avoiding something. It wasn't anything he had said, but something about the way he was looking...

"You were working with the Auror Department during that time, right?"

Moody snorted. "Yeah, you could say that. I was one of the senior Aurors – which meant I got to see a lot of underprepared Auror and Hit Wizard trainees get killed in fights they weren't prepared for, and lead missions in which I was lucky if we got three-quarters of the team out alive."

Harry's mouth fell open. "That bad?"

"It was the middle of the fucking war, Potter, and things were bad in the Ministry," Moody snarled, slamming his spoon on the desk with a clang, both his eyes blazing with fury. "We were overstretched to the limit, and just because Barty fucking Crouch said it was 'okay' and 'legal to use every means necessary to bring in the enemy' didn't mean I was going to do it! No, I brought them in alive, and I tried to bring my team in the same way. Not particularly easy, when you consider the enemy doesn't give a rat's ass about who they kill or what they destroy, but I wasn't going to sink to some levels..."

"Sirius told me Crouch authorized the Unforgivables," Harry said hesitantly.

"Along with a load of other magic – Dark magic, by every definition of the term – that most of us weren't comfortable with, and Dumbledore was livid when he found out," Moody growled. "He warned Crouch that it was dangerous, that using those sorts of spells and techniques would only make us the evils we were fighting, but Crouch didn't listen and didn't care. So Dumbledore got those of us together who had a problem with Crouch's methods and formed the Order of the Phoenix, which got full vigilante status once Crouch found out about it. And when Dumbledore started recruiting straight out of Hogwarts, so did Crouch, and given the hell most students got thanks to the Junior Death Eaters, Crouch got a lot more people than we did." Moody snorted with disgust. "Unfortunately, his recruits tended to die a lot faster - the Ministry didn't like to advertise that fact."

"But you said my parents joined the Order and the Aurors," Harry said sharply.

"They were attempting to both, just like me," Moody said curtly. "Wasn't pleasant, I can say that. So was Sirius, Lupin until he dropped out of the Auror program for reasons he won't even tell me about, Frank and Alice Longbottom..." He ticked them off on his scarred fingers. "Hell, rumour had it that my fucking impersonator last year was even lining up to become a Hit Wizard out of Hogwarts, just like his father –"

"Wait – Barty Crouch Senior was a Hit Wizard?" Harry asked with shock.

"He was," Moody growled. "Which, of course, made it easier for him to authorize the usage of Dark magic against the Death Eaters, considering he didn't know enough to know any better. Hit Wizards don't have the same training Aurors do for dealing with Dark magic, and while there is some cross-over at the higher levels, it was still unbelievably stupid for Crouch to authorize that sort of magic for both sections of the Department. Fuck, even that bastard Scrimgeour called him out on it –"

"Wait, Tonks told me you hate Scrimgeour," Harry interrupted as he swallowed another mouthful of stew.

"And I do," Moody said grimly. "He's a contemptible bastard and a fucking war-profiteer to boot, but he got the same training I did, and he knew that meddling with Dark magic, even to bring down Voldemort's cronies, was dangerous to the extreme and not worth the risk. I said it, Nathaniel Charon – he was the Hit Wizard right below Crouch, he retired just after H.A.I.T. was formed – said it, but Crouch wouldn't listen." Moody gave a bitter laugh. "Made for such a fucking wonderful scene when his son was arrested right out of the Hit Wizard training room by a group of enraged Aurors – and you wonder why there's bad blood between us and Hit Wizards..."

Harry picked at the last bits of his stew for a few seconds as Moody ate voraciously. He thought about what Moody had said, and he thought again of the memories he had seen in the Pensieve last year. Barty Crouch Jr. would have become a Hit Wizard just like Kemester... if he hadn't been found out, he would have worked with my parents...

"When did Kemester join the Ministry?" he asked suddenly. "Did he fight during the war?"

"No, he joined a year or two after with his older brother," Moody replied curtly. "Just after Crouch Jr. got arrested, as a matter of fact."

"And my parents..."

"Yeah, what about them?" Moody asked, setting down his empty hipflask with a grimace.

"Did you ever work with them, train them at all?" Harry asked quietly.

Moody shook his head. "Different groups, Potter. We weren't on the same teams. I worked with them in the Order, but not in the Ministry. And before you ask, yeah, they were good." The old ex-Auror looked away, looking into the cracked Foe-Glass crookedly hanging on the wall. "I miss them and all the rest every day."

Harry swallowed back the unexpected lump in his throat – he didn't expect to see Moody say that, his voice filled with quiet, bitter regret. The voice of a man who had seen too much, seen too many people die. The voice of a man who had to lead people to their deaths, and had to provide comfort to unbelieving families in the rough, awkward tone that all of those conversations follow for men like him.

For a second, Harry tried to imagine Moody offering any sort of condolence to a family, and the lump in his throat grew even bigger. He couldn't imagine it, but something in his gut told him that of all the Aurors he had met, Moody's words would be the most blunt – and the most heartfelt.

"My parents... did they... did they join the Aurors because –"

"Potter," Moody said, his voice abruptly filled with menace, "you'll want to consider that line of questioning very carefully."

"What?" Harry was startled – he hadn't expected this sort of sudden hostility. "I'm only asking why they –"

"And the answers are not pleasant," Moody growled. "And I refuse to give them."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said, Potter," Moody replied, getting to his feet. "Take out your wand."

"Why?" Harry asked warily.

"That was an order, Potter," Moody snapped, drawing his own wand with a single sinuous motion. "I'm going to test how well my former apprentice has trained you, see if you're up to scratch."

"Why won't you tell me about my parents?" Harry demanded, anger flooding through him. "Why are you hiding this from me – they're my parents, I deserve to know!"

"There's a very distinct difference between hiding something and not wanting to talk about it," Moody growled as he stepped around his desk. "Namely that there's deceit involved in one, and about this, I'm not the one to lie to you. And you haven't proven enough maturity to deserve to know a damn thing."

"I can handle whatever you –"

"No, you can't."

Harry was incensed. "After everything I've seen –"

"No, you CAN'T!" Moody roared, his voice booming across the room at shocking volume. Harry's eyes widened at the sheer rage evident on the old Auror's face, and real terror flooded into his gut.

"I saw you coming out of the Pensieve, don't forget that," Moody growled, his voice returning to a normal volume as he faced Harry and raised his wand. "I know you're not ready for this truth."

"Why, because you think I can't handle the truth?" Harry snarled, his own wand snapping up.

"After everything I've seen, Potter, I still cannot reconcile to myself everything related to this," Moody said, his voice grim, yet filled with inexplicable emotion. "It's something I could have gone my entire life not knowing – and the fact that I know enough of it still chills me. But if that doesn't dissuade you – and it really should – then the next time you see Nathan Cassane or Dumbledore, or even Snape, ask them the roles your parents played in the first war." Moody's eyes glittered in the dim candlelight. "In fact, ask Snape first – I'd love to see him explain his way out of this."

"What does Snape have to do with any of this?" Harry asked with growing frustration and confusion.

"Ask him, and make sure to save the memory for my viewing pleasure," Moody growled. "But enough talk about your parents: let's see if you're good enough to honour their memories, so you don't become a memory yourself."

"...we're running out of time..."

"...every evaluation on his psyche is proving inconclusive... magic is still functional, though we can't be certain for how long..."

"...given physical damage, we can't afford to try a more extensive examination without losing the subject..."

"...re-examine those charts, the damage to his brain cannot be that severe given his continued functioning..."

"...don't know how he survived this long..."

He didn't know either. The pain was like a sentient monster, lashing itself to his bones, incinerating tissues with every encroachment –

"Oh, Dmitri?"

He stirred on the floor, blinking rapidly as he tried to regain focus. The floor where he was lying was cold and slippery and looked a bit like glass, yet when he tried to pull himself up, he could only turn helplessly on the floor. The room around him was starkly white and cubical, with light seeming to seep from the surfaces themselves rather than from any lamp. He felt his vision twist sickeningly – for some strange reason, even despite the fact he was lying on a floor, it didn't seem like a floor. The entire room was one floor, and he was on just a piece of it, staring up at...

"...he's moving! Prepare for active monitoring –"

Peeves only gave his rich, insouciant smile. "Hi."

He struggled for breath, to force words free, but something was wrong – it was like he was stuck in an Apparition, with thick bands crushing his chest and throat, preventing him from drawing breath to speak. But even if he was to speak, he had no idea what he would say the poltergeist, just barely visible in a room full of glare and white light –

"Oh, I'm so sorry, is it too bright for you?" Peeves asked mockingly, his voice shifting abruptly to a terrible American accent, abandoned a second later, spinning in mid-air. "You prove me right yet again, Dmitri – your place was always in darkness!"

"-HOLY SHIT –"

The walls went black, and he felt gravity shift, tossing him from one side of the room to another. He tasted blood in his mouth, and fighting against the bands on his chest, he spat it free. The only light in the room was the glimmer surrounding the ghost, gleefully frolicking across the walls – or floors – of the room –

"...restore the connections, I repeat, restore the fucking connections – I'm not going to lose valuable data because of –"

"I don't have much time, Dmitri," Peeves said conversationally, crossing his arms over his incorporeal chest, "so let me break you down here. Yes, I'm really here – although not for long – and before you even begin to ask questions, let me inform you that you won't be here for long either."

"How..." he managed to gasp, clawing the words past the blockage in his throat...

"- I'm hearing sounds in there – FUCK! Goddamn it, get that equipment working or I swear I'll –"

"The toad is on her way down," Peeves explained, a cruel smile crossing his face, "and she will have decided that you've outlived your usefulness – providing you had any to her to begin with. So... she'll put you away."

The words hit him like a sack of bricks. Even though he could hardly remember his own name through the pain, he realized instantly what the poltergeist was telling him.

And it terrified him.

"Not... not Azkaban –"

"Now listen," Peeves said reprovingly, drifting much closer to him, the cruel smile never vanishing, "I really need you to survive, Dmitri –"

"Why... why don't... just let me fucking die!"

" – If you don't get that monitoring apparatus back up I swear I'm going to take you apart with my bare hands! He's saying something, he's talking –"

"Now, now," Peeves said with a sniff, "you're a lot more valuable to me than Snape was, and I don't think your brother would want you to die in vain. You're an interesting guy, Dmitri, and I wouldn't mind have you sane and workable for the foreseeable future. So here's what you're gonna do – the caterers around Paradise Island tend to be a little, ah, ravenous, so I need you to keep that polluted soul safely inside you, okay?"

He couldn't muster any words – he could only stare in horror as Peeves floated a little higher, the deranged grin returning to the ghost's face.

"And once you get settled in, make sure to ask for a friend of mine – you'll know him when you see him. Terrific guy, great conversationalist, amazing with the truth."

"-we're restoring contact now, sir, in ten seconds –"

"I'm..." he gasped, fighting desperately to pull the strangled words free, "I'm here... on a... lie!"

"Maybe," Peeves said, his smile going impossible wide, "but we should always look forward, Dmitri, remember that – and where you're going, the truth's the only thing you'll have!"

The lights slammed back on, and Dmitri Kemester tumbled back down onto another floor, and lost consciousness.

Dolores Umbridge frowned as she stared at the two Unspeakables, both looking harried and extremely irritated as they straightened their robes.

"So you're saying we don't have any more information from him?" she asked disapprovingly.

"His mind is fracturing badly, Madam Umbridge," the first Unspeakable said, his tone sepulchral in its intensity. "Any more tests could break him entirely – the physical damage to his head, combined with assorted mental stresses has nearly rendered him catatonic. More tests would kill him."

"And we don't want Dmitri Kemester dead – yet," Umbridge said softly, scribbling some notes on her clipboard. "And the... you called it a 'black-out period'?"

The two Unspeakables exchanged glances. "It was an equipment failure," the second Unspeakable said bluntly. "It happens with these sorts of experimental apparatuses."

Umbridge made a disapproving sound. "Is there any more information that you believe can be extracted regarding his physical, mental, or magical states?"

"Once again, not without killing him," the first Unspeakable said grimly.

"Fine, then put him in Bode's crates and have him quietly shipped to the disposal site," Umbridge replied curtly. Disapparating with a crack, to reappear in her office a split second later.

Before she could even sit down, someone hammered on the door.

"Come in."

The dark-haired and scarred form of Sanders slid into her office. "I've got good news and bad news, Madam Undersecretary."

"Good news first, Sanders," Umbridge replied sweetly, gesturing for her Hit Wizard to sit down. "What news from the hunt for Sirius Black?"

"We just got an anonymous tip that he was seen three weeks ago, on the night the Shrieking Shack was destroyed in a fire," Sanders said breathlessly. "Apparently, he was critically wounded. My guess is that he hasn't left Hogsmeade."

"Why did it take three weeks for us to get this information?" Umbridge exclaimed, her eyes widening furiously as she began scribbling notes on her clipboard.

"I'm assuming because it was the same night and morning that the Ministry was attacked," Sanders said in a low voice. "Wilson's mustering a team as we speak – do we have clearance to go?"

"Yes," Umbridge said instantly. "No Dementors this time – their presence will tip Black off, and if he has recovered sufficiently, we can't let him slip out of our net."

"It will be done."

"The bad news, then?" Umbridge asked, not looking up from her clipboard.

She heard a thump, and saw the Daily Prophet that Sanders had dropped on her desk. Rather, she saw the headline.

Her heart started hammering furiously. She picked up the paper, certain that she had misread the words.

A paragraph later, she knew she hadn't.

"Madam Undersecretary?"

Umbridge crushed the paper in her fist. "Get me the Minister – now."

"My lord?"

Lord Voldemort did not look up from his tome. A frown creased his lipless face as he tapped the cauldron delicately with his wand, sending a gush of steam into the dimly lit dungeon. The magic was beginning to take shape, but not nearly quickly enough – the experiment would indeed require more time for the power to coalesce into an appropriate form –

"My lord, you have an owl."

He looked up, and turned to face the haggard-looking Lucius Malfoy. The man leaned heavily on his silver cane, and his robes hung heavily around his shoulders. The past few weeks have not been kind to him, Voldemort noted dispassionately. His loss.

"The tip has been given to Wilson?"

"Yes, and the Death Eaters are prepared to converge upon the squad as soon as they get in position," Lucius replied hesitantly. "My lord, it is unlikely that Black –"

"If, as I suspect, he remains bedridden from his horrific injuries, and given the action I have taken to deprive the Order of their headquarters, the Order will converge around Black for their meeting," Voldemort replied smoothly, not even looking up as he scanned his tome more carefully. A wave of his wand sent potions ingredients spilling onto the end of the table, quickly being prepared by animated knives and pestles. "If not, then we will have control of a squad of Hit Wizards and Aurors – a valuable asset in the coming days."

"Regarding the magic used to... block the Headquarters," Malfoy began carefully, "we recently received a letter from the Italians..."

He extended a very official-looking paper that Voldemort took and scanned quickly. His red eyes narrowed for a few seconds before handing the paper back to Lucius.

"I see no problem."

"They are threatening you, my lord –"

"Idle threats, nothing more," Voldemort said crisply, as another wave of his wand sent the potions ingredients in precisely the correct order and amounts into a solid silver cauldron in the corner, under which a crackling bluebell flame immediately lit. "They are demanding another price, and if they wish for me to pay it, inform them to come to my country and exact payment here." He gave his wand a short flick, and before Malfoy's amazed eyes, a massive three-dimensional image, composed of flickering green light and ashes, erupted over the table. Voldemort nodded with satisfaction.

"My lord, what exactly is –"

"Old plans for a magical... 'device' that I designed forty years ago," Voldemort said softly, "complete with necessary Arithmancy and leyline calculations."

"I apologize, my lord, for not understanding..."

"It's magical theory, Lucius, some of which has not been seen for over three hundred years," Voldemort said smoothly, making a few adjustments to the image with jets of red ash from his wand before spinning it slowly with a wave of his hand. "News from Hogwarts?"

Lucius shifted uncomfortably. "There was a letter from my son that I found... disturbing, to say the least."

"Indeed."

"He has asked for your permission to accelerate the Hogwarts mission, and Nott has consented to agree."

Voldemort vanished the image with a wave of his wand, only to replace it an instant later with what appeared to be a stream of Arithmancy diagrams and equations, scrawled in red flaming characters. Lucius couldn't help but to gasp in astonishment – it was theory beyond him, as even some of the equations seemed to be multidimensional in appearance, crossing each other at bizarre angles and twisting spasmodically as Voldemort watched them.

"Magic of this scope operates according to patterns beyond even my ken," the Dark Lord murmured as he rearranged the diagram with delicate brushes of his wand, as if he was completing the finishing touches of a grand painting. "And the temporal distortion is a coefficient I cannot afford to ignore. What prompted this new... enthusiasm from your son?"

"He was attacked," Lucius growled. "By Harry Potter."

He gave Voldemort the letter, which the Dark Lord read – and then immediately incinerated, with a tap of his wand.

"Such information is dangerous to be kept in writing," Voldemort said as explanation, pointing his wand at the silver cauldron and flicking upwards. A second later, a long liquid arc of silvery potion erupted from the cauldron – only to be frozen in midair by a thoughtful tap of the Dark Lord's wand. Lucius could only watch with amazement – the liquid hadn't frozen at all. It was still quite liquid, only floating in the air as if paused in mid-arc.

"My lord... this is..."

"Give Nott permission to proceed," Voldemort said as he critically examined the potion hovering in the air before nodding with satisfaction. With a slash of his wand, the potion resumed its arc – landing directly in the cauldron that was set on Voldemort's massive stone table. "And tell his father that I am satisfied with the accommodations he has provided for me."

Lucius' expression was rigid. "My lord, as soon as Malfoy Manor is rebuilt, I will –"

"I'm sure you will, Lucius," Voldemort cut him off briskly as he returned to examining his tome. "Anything else?"

"Just this," Malfoy growled, extending a rather crumpled piece of newspaper to the Dark Lord.

Voldemort read the headline, and his eyes hardened into solid pools of anger.

"This," he said quietly, "will not do at all."

"My lord –"

"Bring Snape to me, here," Voldemort said softly. "His services will be required, now that I must accelerate my own plans."

"Y-Yes, my lord," Lucius whispered, visible fear playing across his face. Though he wasn't showing it, the elder Malfoy knew that the Dark Lord was livid – and that repressed anger was a terrifying thing indeed.

"Cassane must be shown – again – that this... behaviour is inappropriate," Voldemort said coldly, his eyes returning to the complex diagram suspended above him. With a wave of his wand, he inscribed an entire new line of flaming characters encircling the image. "I will be sending him a few appropriate messages shortly, but in the mean time, ensure that Fenrir's pack, the Transylvanians, and any available Dementors know of his location and anything or anyone our intelligence indicates that he cares about. Tell the Transylvanians first – if I'm correct, they have a score to settle with him anyways, and I wouldn't want to deprive them of his blood."

Malfoy's eyes widened even further. "I-It will be done, my lord –"

"I am not finished. I would also speak with Barnabus Cuffe and Rita Skeeter, as soon as possible. Ensure that Cuffe remains alive."

"My lord, you s-said you wanted to speak with them –"

"I am just as comfortable speaking to Rita Skeeter's head as I am the rest of her," Voldemort replied calmly as he returned to his work.

"Not bad, Potter," Moody said coolly, lowering his wand. "I've seen worse. Certainly better than our little fight yesterday – this time, you actually hit my Shield Charm."

Harry struggled to catch his breath. He clutched at the stitch in his chest, from dodging the avalanche of curses and hexes the Auror had

launched at him. Moody didn't move that quickly, but he kept Harry easily at bay. If only I could break his damned Shield Charm, or get close enough to tackle him or something... but no, he likes that damned Slickening Charm more than Tonks does...

"Get some water," Moody said curtly, moving back behind his desk to scribble some notes in his book. "We're nearly done tonight."

"I'll be okay," Harry panted, "just give me a –"

He didn't get another word out, because Moody had whirled his wand and sent a jet of icy cold water straight into Harry's face. He coughed and sputtered against the deluge, but a second later it was gone, and Moody was tucking his wand away, a smirk on his face.

"Thanks," Harry spat sarcastically, accepting the towel Moody casually tossed him, already damp with sweat.

"Potter, when are you going to get it through your thick skull that when I tell you to do something, I'd like to actually do it?" Moody asked conversationally.

Harry rolled his eyes, but joined Moody at the desk. "So what else have you planned, Professor?" he asked dryly.

Moody pointed at the wall of papers magically suspended (none of which, to Harry's surprise, had gotten damaged in the duel that evening). "Tell me what you see here."

Harry squinted as he stepped closer. "It looks like a lot of calculations I don't really understand, and... are these biographies? You've got notes here about..."

"Every student potentially connected to these ghost attacks," Moody finished, crossing his arms over his chest as he surveyed the wall. "Except for my notes on you, obviously – you're a different case. But as you know, I'm looking for connections between the situations, ways that we might be able to predict who the next targets could be, or the manner of the next strike. Most importantly, we want to know for absolute certainty the identity of the culprit."

Harry's eyes darkened. "What I told you last night didn't mean anything did it?"

"Just because you think it could be Malfoy doesn't mean we can exactly make a move to strike against him," Moody retorted, his magical eye whirling as it scanned the wall.

"Why not?" Harry asked angrily. "I'm a better fighter than he is, and you wiped the floor with me – why don't you get in here and give him Veritaserum or something?"

Moody turned to look at Harry, and although his blue eye was still sweeping the wall, he chuckled under his breath. "If it were that simple, Potter."

"I don't see why it's not."

"That's because you haven't considered that we don't know a damn thing about the magic that the suspect is using," Moody replied, all traces of humour gone as he returned to staring at the wall. "It could be activated with the speed of thought itself, or triggered upon the user's relaxation of control – Voldemort used that type of magic in the first war to devastating effect."

Harry frowned. "I've never heard of spells like that..."

"Understandable, considering that type of magic is on the fringes of what one could consider civilized, and devilishly tricky to utilize," Moody growled. "He magically plants a trigger in the mind of some hapless dupe under the Imperius Curse, and when that curse is broken either by one of our curses or Voldemort's whim, the man's brain explodes in his skull or the flesh sloughs off his bones."

"What?"

"Fortunately, that spell takes a good hour to cast properly," Moody continued, ignoring the horrified look on Harry's face. "Still nasty as fuck, but extremely limited, and I think you see my point."

"So you're saying that even if we surprise Malfoy, he could still trigger the magic before we could do a damned thing?" Harry asked with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Potentially," Moody said darkly. "But even if the magic wasn't like that, and required time and location and a shitload of other conditions to work and we got the suspect here, it's not as easy as just a dose of Veritaserum."

"It's the strongest truth potion in the world!" Harry protested. "I don't see how it isn't just that easy. Don't you have some?"

"Of course I do –"

"Then we don't even need to go to Snape!" Harry exclaimed. "One dose and we could solve all of this in one swoop!"

"In all circumstances, Potter, that would be my automatic solution," Moody said tersely, "except for one little factor: our resident Death Eater professor."

"Snape's not even here –"

"I'm not talking about the professor himself, but something that he made," Moody cut Harry off. "Have you ever heard of Liar's Heartstone?"

Harry shook his head blankly.

"I thought not. It's one of the greatest innovations in Potions besides the Wolfsbane Potion in the past ten years," Moody said grimly. "Even I'm not sure of all of the details, but from the reports I read in the Auror Office, the potion is solidified and encapsulated so it can be easily consumed orally, and it builds up in your system the more you consume it. What it does is much more interesting – if the user is exposed to any sort of powerful truth drug or potion, the components in the truth potion will react with the Liar's Heartstone and cause a powerful heart attack, killing our suspect near-instantly."

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "That sounds... suspicious."

"Of course it is, it's fucking unbelievable, but even Dumbledore has vouched for it," Moody snarled bitterly. "Makes my life a living hell, but that's poisons and potions for you – never a straight game when that type of trickery comes into play. And can you guess who the 'prodigy' who earned his Potions Mastery by designing it was?"

Harry went red with anger. "You're kidding me."

"It fucking had to be Snape," Moody said viciously, slamming his fist on the wall. "As if the shit-eating bastard wasn't untrustworthy enough, we now have this! The reason I couldn't force-feed him Veritaserum when he got back from his suspicious absence during the fight at Hogwarts, and the reason we can't go after any of his 'favoured Slytherins' without absolute proof – I'm not going to be responsible for the death of innocent students."

"Malfoy's far from innocent," Harry pointed out.

"Doesn't make it right to kill him – or attempt to drown him in acid, I might add," Moody snapped, turning to glare at Harry with both of his mismatched eyes, "but that's not the point. What we can do is get whatever information we possibly can about the attacks, and see if we can draw parallels and make connections."

Harry closed his eyes and thought. Besides the ghosts, what tied the attacks together? The victims are different, their conditions were different, the ghosts were different... wait a second!

"What about Peeves?"

"What about Peeves?" Moody snapped.

"He's been acting weird this year," Harry said quickly, remembering the deranged grins and disturbingly cryptic warnings the poltergeist had been giving all year. "Saying things... he seems more uncontrolled, and, well, evil than I've ever seen him. Do you think –"

"Dumbledore mentioned that damned poltergeist was acting strange," Moody muttered.

"I've seen him before every attack," Harry continued. "In fact..." The realization hit him like a hammer blow. "He's led me to the site of every attack."

"But why you?" Moody growled, his mind racing. "Why not the Headmaster or another student?"

Harry raised his hands helplessly. "I don't know, Professor. I mean, how much do we know about poltergeists?"

"Not enough," Moody said, yanking open his book and scribbling furiously. "Too much of it is fucking classified by the Department of Mysteries as 'dangerous, experimental subject material' –"

Moody stopped speaking, and it was almost as if Harry could see the idea drifting straight into the Auror's head, causing a wicked smile to spring up on his face.

"And we've got a way in."

"How?"

"Broderick Bode," Moody said, his smile growing wider as he set down his book. "He's the Order's man in the Department of Mysteries – relatively well-placed Unspeakable, and one who is loyal to our cause."

"I think I met him," Harry said suddenly, his eyes lighting up with recognition. "He got me out of the Ministry with Tonks and the twins, when Kemester had brought me in for interrogation! He's definitely on our side."

Moody nodded decisively – and then swore. "And I can't go to him – fuck!"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Since Dumbledore disappeared – and Merlin only knows where – we need to keep Order members at the school, in case the Death Eaters decide to get cute," Moody snarled. "And with Hagrid and that

motherfucker Snape gone, it's only Minerva and I at the school – not nearly enough."

"You've got Flitwick too – he's a duelling champion!" Harry argued.

"Three against any Death Eaters Voldemort decides to send?" Moody retorted. "And with as many students and non-combatants as we have here? I don't think so."

Harry took a deep breath – this was a risk. "Then let me do it."

"What?"

"Let me contact the Order and Bode, get the message out," Harry said urgently. "I want to help the Order, and I've got a way out of the school that will keep me protected and unidentified – it's a project that Tonks and I were working on."

"Does it work?" Moody asked sceptically.

"As well as can be expected," Harry replied, carefully ignoring the memory of the fight in the Ministry. I can use my Clarissa Desdame simulacrum, hopefully there won't be anything wrong with my magic like last time...

Moody looked at Harry for a long few seconds, and Harry fought the urge to fidget under the Auror's stare or lose his patience.

"It's risky," Moody finally said.

"Don't you trust that I can handle myself?" Harry asked exasperatedly. "I've done this before!"

"No, I don't trust that," Moody retorted. "But," he added, with a sigh he filled with frustration, "we don't really have much of a choice now, do we? You've got tonight, Potter, and that's it. Hell, consider it your first real Order of the Phoenix mission. Prove to me I'm not wasting my time with you."

"You can trust me," Harry said with a curt nod.

"No, I can't," Moody growled.

Harry glared at the Auror. "You know what I mean, Professor."

"Just don't die on me – I'd hate to have to tell my protégé I got her lover killed."

Harry went red with embarrassment at Moody's mocking words, but he turned towards the door, heading towards the tiny room that was just outside of Moody's office. I'll give him that one, he thought, as he felt a thrill of anticipation.

Tonks, here I come.

The orders had been delivered, the owls had been sent, and once again, Lucius Malfoy was alone.

He stepped away from the fireplace, set in dark stone – so much unlike the panelled mahogany and white marble of Malfoy Manor – and looked around the room. Like most studies in pureblood manors, it was lined with books and art, but he did not feel comfortable in this room. The books were filled with black magic that even he shied away from, and the art was dark and grisly, with gothic scenes and writhing, naked bodies...

No, he much preferred Malfoy Manor to this. No wonder Felix Nott is a twisted man if he grew up in a place like, and his son is probably worse. I wonder how Draco has handled it...

"Enjoying the room?"

Lucius did not turn to acknowledge Nott's arrival – the man was a bootlicker, and a gutless coward to boot. "No."

"Have you heard from my son?"

"He is all right," Lucius muttered, glaring into the crackling fire. "The mission proceeds as planned."

"The Dark Lord is wise to direct him so," Nott said with a decisive nod. "Would you mind vacating my study – I need to use the fire for a Floo call."

For a moment, indescribable rage filled Lucius. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right that this twisted bastard had favour and he did not, that the Dark Lord had thrown the family of his greatest supporters to the wolves for the sake of convenience –

"Of course."

"Your wife is in my secondary study, if you're interested," Nott said coolly. "Now if you don't mind..."

"I'm leaving," Lucius growled, brushing past the man as he stormed out of the room as quickly as he could, his cane thumping against the ground rhythmically with every step. It was shameful, it was bloody disgraceful – if my father could see what has become of our family now...

"Lucius..."

His steps had taken him to the dark-walled secondary study, and it chilled him that he did not remember how he got there. Narcissa, his beautiful wife, was standing next to the fire, her normally proud features filled with despair. He couldn't blame her – in just over a month she had gone from being a proud and rich woman, married to one of the most powerful patriarchs in their world...

And now I can barely even call myself her husband, Lucius thought bitterly as he sank into the high-backed armchair and stared into the flames. I can't satisfy her anymore... shit, I can't even satisfy myself...

He felt Narcissa's hand on his shoulder as she sat delicately on the sturdy arm of the chair. "The orders were given?"

"The Dark Lord is relentless," Lucius said tonelessly, "and once again, I don't have a role."

"The Dark Lord is likely concerned that one of his greatest assets –"

"The Dark Lord doesn't care, Narcissa," Lucius snarled, not trusting himself to meet her eyes - he didn't trust himself not to break, but into rage or shameful grief, he didn't know. "He betrayed me – all those years of service, and what do I get in return?"

"It's not good for us to be here," Narcissa said in a low voice. "We should look for lodging in Diagon Alley –"

"We're exiles, Narcissa," Lucius said bitterly, "and the rest of our world assumed we died when the manor was destroyed..."

His voice trailed off as he remembered the attack. He had watched the Hit Wizards and Gringotts curse-breakers mercilessly smash the enchantments surrounding the manor with brutally powerful spells. He had watched the goblins brigade, armoured in blackened silver, launch a series of long, metallic barrels into the sky, burning with orange fire. He had watched them gleefully pick off the white peacocks – a Malfoy family legacy for over four centuries – with blasts of fire that cooked the birds to cinders. He had watched as the leading goblin had screamed several guttural syllables and summoned all the remaining gold in the manor into a heap that the goblins descended upon like leathery maggots.

He had watched as the metallic barrels hit the manor – the Malfoy home for centuries – and flatten it in seconds in a concussive wave that sent even the goblins sprawling. The white marble had been seared black, the gardens burnt to cinders, and all that was left of the Malfoy family legacy was a pile of photo albums and invaluable artefacts hastily packed into two trunks by Narcissa, the articles damp with her tears.

She deserves better than this, Lucius thought suddenly, and even after everything, she remains by my side. She took our vows more seriously than I ever did, and if I believed in that sort of love...

He abruptly stood, sudden purpose in his mind. He wasn't going to let his family die a cowardly death in the twisted manor of a family of freaks – he was a Malfoy, and that counted for something. "Pack your trunk, Narcissa, we're leaving."

"Where are we going?"

"Anywhere," Lucius snarled through clenched teeth as he swept out of the room, "that's not here."

In the blackened ruin of the Shrieking Shack, a young blonde woman hidden behind three collapsed beams awoke with a start.

"Lumos," Harry muttered, lighting the wand under his simulacrum's fingers with a touch as she rose to her feet. It was dark, and the faint light was casting eerie shadows across the blasted wreckage, a thicket of bouncing darkness and claw-like beams.

He shivered, and pulled his robes closer around himself. It was cold, colder than he had expected. It shouldn't be this cold, he thought to herself as she staggered to his feet and adjusted his robes – surprisingly ragged – around himself. And the way my clothes are... if I remember correctly, Tonks stashed the extra clothes at the Hog's Head – and Sirius is there too! Hell, if Madam Pomfrey was there, he's probably back to full strength...

Harry took a deep breath, feeling his simulacrum's lungs fill with chill air, and he began to walk unsteadily towards the village, quickly regaining the feel of the simulacrum. On impulse, he threw his cloak over his head – it was late, and the Hog's Head was likely to be full. Probably better that fewer people know that Harry Potter's attorney is visiting bars like that...

He had full control of the simulacrum as he reached the outskirts of Hogsmeade, and he increased his pace. He didn't have a lot of time, and if he was going to see Sirius and explain everything before going to Cassane, he had to hurry –

He rounded the corner and froze in mid-step – because about a dozen hooded figures were surrounding the door of the Hog's Head, blocked by the stubborn, grim-eyed bartender from entering.

He recognized the cut of their robes instantly – he had killed a number of them at the Ministry in another simulacrum.

Uh oh.

Harry's mind raced as he walked closer. He needed to get inside the Hog's Head, this was the last thing he needed right now. And why the hell would a bunch of them try to enter that bar anyways... unless they found out that Sirius was here...

"I told you already!" the bartender bellowed suddenly, his voice echoing down the street. "Unless you've got a warrant, you're not going to be searching my bar for nothing!"

"Trying to hide something, Aberforth?" one of the Aurors sneered. Harry realized with a jolt of surprise that he recognized him – it was Wilson, the scarred wizard he had fooled back when sneaking into Hogwarts at the beginning of the year. He also had a suspicion that he recognized the bartender's name – where the hell had he heard that name before? Strangely, a memory of Hagrid came to mind –

"Look, it'll be a quick search, and we'll be on our way," a stocky Hit Wizard with short, bristly hair and a heavy jaw said anxiously, raising a hand as if that would placate the rising tension. Harry felt another surge of shock – he recognized that Hit Wizard as well. He had been with Kemester back when I was arrested on the road... but I thought those two were partners or something, so where's Kemester now? "It's nothing to be worried about, Aberforth, we're just looking for Black, it'll be quick –"

"And I'll lose half my clientele in about twenty seconds!" Aberforth snarled, "but, of course, you know that as well as anyone, Mr. Larshall! Matter of fact, this isn't about Black at all! You just want an excuse to round up my paying customers –"

Suddenly, an idea leapt into Harry's head, and he ran a hand through the long blonde hair of his simulacrum. It would be risky, that was for sure, and he had no way of knowing that the hard-eyed bartender would be able to follow the bluff, but it just might work...

"Contrary to your belief," a dark-haired Hit Wizard – one Harry thought he recognized, as a member of H.A.I.T. – said crisply, "we're not looking to investigate any quasi-legal activities that may or may not be taking place upon the premise of your building –"

The bartender snorted loudly.

"Aberforth, there's no need to be difficult –"

"As a matter of fact, there is."

Harry was shocked by the crisp, icy authority that emerged from his voice as he stepped forward, tossing back his hood to glare at the Hit Wizards and Aurors with full force, even as a few snapped their aim to him. Even though his heart was hammering in his chest, he didn't back down – everything was depending on his supreme arrogance –

"I'm sorry, who are you?" the dark-haired asked roughly.

"You don't recognize me?" Harry retorted with a huff. "Let me introduce myself: Clarissa Desdame, of Desdame & Vuneren, attorney of Magical Law."

Aberforth's momentary surprise vanished as he gave Harry a firm nod of approval. "Glad you got my message, Miss Desdame. Hopefully, you can get this cleared up without an issue –"

"When did you call a lawyer?" one of the Hit Wizards hissed. "We've been watching him the whole damn –"

Aberforth snorted again. "Son, when I saw your posse come up and bang on my door, it wasn't a difficult move for me to make."

"Let me see the warrant, if you have one," Harry asked, easily feigning disdain as she stepped up to Wilson.

The Auror stared at her for a long few seconds, as if he was trying to spot a hole in Harry's words, but then his gaze shifted, drifting downward to rake every inch of the simulacrum's feminine figure. Harry suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to slap Wilson as hard as he could, but he held his temper, keeping his mask of aloof disinterest and disgust for the Aurors and Hit Wizards to see...

Wilson slowly reached into his pocket and slapped an official-looking paper into Harry's waiting palm. "There you go: a legitimate warrant, signed by the Senior Undersecretary herself."

Why can't Umbridge get the hell out my life? Harry thought angrily as he scanned the paper. A sinking feeling filled his gut – it actually seemed legitimate... "Why didn't you show the bartender this before?"

"I was hoping to avoid a confrontation," Wilson growled through gritted teeth.

Harry's mind raced as he scanned the paper again. Damn it, damn it, there's no real way around this...

"Allow me a minute to converse with my client inside," he said finally, handing the warrant back to Wilson.

"Not in your bloody life!" Wilson replied quickly, stuffing the warrant back in his cloak. "As much as your client professes not to believe it, we're looking for Sirius Black, and we received a tip that he's here. Now, with the Anti-Apparition Jinxes and some other charms all over this place, there's no way Black's getting out if he's here, but if your client's in league with Black, he could use –"

"One of my other clients," Harry said in a low voice, in the back of his mind savouring the incredible irony of his words, "is the wizard Harry Potter, who Black wants to kill – do you really think I'm going to take on a client who is a co-conspirator to Black?"

That seemed to stop most of the group, but Larshall was unfazed. "I saw Sirius Black rescue Harry Potter with my own eyes, Miss Desdame, we can't afford to take the risk –"

"But the Prophet said –" an Auror began quietly.

Larshall glared at the Auror. "I've heard enough about that damned article today, Barkley –"

"It's for your own safety, Miss Desdame," Wilson interrupted insincerely with a lecherous wink. "We don't want you to get hurt –"

"Watch your tone with my lawyer!" Aberforth spat, his own wand beginning to rise –

"Aberforth," Harry said warningly, and the old wizard lowered his wand. "All right, supervised conversation with one Auror present..." He let his voice trail off as he scanned the group – which of them could be fooled into giving Harry enough time to inform Aberforth and possibly Sirius...?

He paused, and spotted a wizard dressed in relatively new Hit Wizard robes at the back of the group. He was unremarkable in nearly every way, except for the fact that his hair was very subtly changing colour...

Perfect.

"That one," Harry said, pointing at the wizard in the back. "He can listen."

"I believe I give my men orders, Miss Desdame, not you –" Wilson said angrily.

"It's joint, Rogan, let the new guy take it," the dark-haired Hit Wizard said curtly.

"Sanders –"

"Oy! What the hell's your name?" Sanders shouted, and the Hit Wizard jerked to attention.

"Ian Perris, sir!"

"Mr. Perris, you go with the lawyer and Mr. Aberforth inside," Sanders said roughly, glaring at Wilson as the young Hit Wizard shouldered his way to the front. "You've got five minutes, Desdame, and then we're coming in."

"Done," Harry replied curtly, and without another word, he steered a protesting Aberforth inside the Hog's Head, the young Hit Wizard right behind him.

As Harry had expected, the bar was quite full, and a number of hooded figures looked up as the unlikely trio strode behind the bar into a tiny storage room that Aberforth carefully closed behind them.

The second the latch clicked, his wand snapped up and –

"Relax, old man, it's just Tonks!" Harry said angrily, his gaze snapping to the nervous looking Hit Wizard. "Great acting, by the way."

"Actually, I-I –" the Hit Wizard began in a quavering voice.

Harry's heart immediately began hammering with panic – did he grab the wrong person?

"– Am glad to see both of you are alive and kicking," the Hit Wizard finished, even as his features became feminine, his hair became bright pink, and his face adopted a devious smile.

Aberforth didn't relax – in fact, his eyebrows narrowed sharply as he lit a few candles with a tap of his wand. "Not funny at all, young lady!"

"Oh, I don't know about that, I thought it was pretty damn hilarious," Tonks replied breezily as she shook out her hair and ruefully toyed with the over-sized Hit Wizard robes. "In any case, Aberforth Dumbledore, meet Clarissa Desdame."

"I'm sorry, Dumbledore?" Harry blurted with shock. A second later, he realized he might have been able to recognize the man if he had gotten to see him in better light – the streets of Hogsmeade weren't very well-lit around the Hog's Head. Aberforth shared his brother's

bright blue eyes, but the lines around them told very different stories that those around the eyes of the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Aberforth grunted. "Seems your brilliance comes in spurts, girl. You don't look much like a Ministry attorney, but just the same, nice hustle out there –"

"No need to mince words, Aberforth, she's in the Order," Tonks interrupted.

"Oh really?" Aberforth asked sceptically. "Dumbledore never told us that."

"Sleeper agent," Tonks explained hastily. "Sirius will back it up, and with Dumbledore, Lupin, and Snape missing, we need everyone we can get right now!"

Aberforth still looked suspicious. "How much does she know?"

"Oh come on, Aberforth, don't be stupid, she knows a lot!" Tonks said testily. "She knows Sirius is innocent, if that's what you mean – I mean, hell, do you think your brother would let her become Harry's attorney if she wasn't in the Order?"

"I don't understand half of the things Albus does these days, and right now he's not here, and we've got a situation on our hands," Aberforth replied tersely. "If that warrant is legit –"

"It is," Harry said tersely "Is Sirius here?"

"Whatever's left of the Order is here right now," Aberforth said icily. "They're in my room, above the bar, and if that group sees them with Black –"

"The warrant only covered the bar itself, not your personal quarters," Harry said, thinking fast as his eyes brightened. "They'll need a second warrant to get up there –"

"And they'll get it," Tonks said quietly. "Sanders and Wilson are taking orders directly from Umbridge, she'll investigate further... and they'll keep a perimeter, so Sirius won't have a chance to get out –"

"Unless," Harry said suddenly, an idea leaping to the forefront of his mind, "we can give them what they need to see."

He explained the idea, and Tonks smiled immediately. "That could work, if we get the right investigator –"

"Sanders is too smart to let you look," Aberforth said roughly. "He'll do it himself."

"Then let's hope he's not a Death Eater," Harry said bracingly.

The Hit Wizards and Aurors searched the Hog's Head with methodical precision. Most of the clientele had hastily exited the bar the second the group had entered, and it didn't take long for the investigators to finish searching the bar's single room.

And much to Leon Sanders' rising fury, they had found nothing. Not even a single Concealment Charm over anything. It was just a filthy, smelly bar – no Sirius Black. So much for following tips three weeks old...

"So, you happy?" Aberforth snarled from his place behind the bar, crossing his arms as he glared at Sanders. "You scared all my customers away, and I'm going to lose gold because of this!"

Sanders felt himself flushing with humiliation – there were very few things he hated more than being proven wrong. One reason Kemester and I got along so famously – we both liked to prove each other wrong. Good thing he's in Azkaban right now – the last thing I want is to see his face...

"Nothing's gotten past the perimeter?" he asked Larshall quietly.

"Nothing, Leon," Larshall replied tensely.

"Son of a bitch –"

"Sir, we have human presences upstairs!" Perris shouted, waving his wand.

"What's upstairs, Aberforth?" Sanders snarled immediately, rounding on the bartender.

"My poker buddies," Aberforth replied stiffly.

"I'm sorry?"

"We drink, we play cards, we gamble, we have a good time. What's your damn point?" Aberforth asked angrily.

"You leave your bar unattended to play cards?" Wilson asked suspiciously.

"Everyone who steps in here knows not to touch my wares or gold if I'm not here," Aberforth replied evenly. "I can step out, play a few hands, everything's fine."

"I'm checking upstairs," Perris said brightly, moving towards the staircase –

"You don't have a warrant to go up there –"

"Let him go, Aberforth," Desdame said quietly, from her spot next to Aberforth, slightly veiled in shadows. She had remained remarkably quiet for a lawyer as the Aurors and Hit Wizards had searched the bar. "You've got nothing to hide."

"I'm going with Perris," Sanders said roughly, glaring at Wilson. "You take the rest of them outside – this'll be pretty quick."

Wilson nodded, clearly unhappy, but he didn't say anything to Sanders, instead yelling at the rest of the group to get moving.

"Come on, sir," Perris said eagerly, quickly moving up the rickety wooden stairs with the exuberance of inexperience. Sanders moved

up more cautiously, approaching the heavy oak door at the top of the stairs with his wand drawn.

He hammered on it twice. "Hit Wizards, open up!"

There was a scuffle of chairs, and then –

"Nice to see you too, Sanders," Kingsley Shacklebolt said in his slow soothing tone as he opened the door. "Might want to lower that wand, though – don't want to put a man's eye out."

"You – you play poker with Aberforth?" Sanders asked incredulously, stepping into the tiny room. The room was pretty small, but crammed into it was Arthur and Molly Weasley, Elphias Doge, Dedalus Diggle, and a woman he thought he recognized as Hestia Jones. A large black dog was sleeping in a makeshift bed in the corner, which Sanders could hardly see behind the chairs, table, and cloaks hanging on every available hook. "Who's winning?"

"Hestia keeps taking all our money, I'm afraid," Diggle said disappointedly, tossing a handful of cards to Arthur Weasley, who was dealing. "Think I'm going to make a comeback, though – Elphias is just terrible, and you'd think a man that old would –"

"Sorry for interrupting your game, then," Sanders interrupted with a nod, as he quickly looked around the room. "None of you noticed anything suspicious, then?"

"It's too damn tight in here for us not to notice anything suspicious," Hestia Jones said irritably, as she tossed a few Knuts onto the table. "Next time, we're doing this at my place, and I don't care what Aberforth says –"

"All right, all right," Sanders said, backing away, a hint of a smile crossing his face even as he inwardly swore. "Didn't know Aberforth had a dog –"

"He's a stray," Kingsley said with a heavy nod. "Poor thing's getting old – probably have to put her down soon."

"Sir, we should probably do a full search –" Perris said anxiously.

"No, there's nothing up here," Sanders cut him off tiredly. "In any case, it's getting late – go home, Perris. You did well tonight, especially for a new recruit."

"A word, Leon," Kingsley said, as Perris rapidly descended the stairs.

Sanders sighed wearily, and wiped the trickle of sweat from his face as he felt the clamminess of a burned-out adrenaline rush seep through him. "Look, I didn't want you to be transferred off the investigation –"

"It was Scrimgeour's orders, not from Umbridge," Kingsley replied reasonably. "You're putting my notes to good use?"

"The tip said he was here, Kingsley," Sanders growled, banging his fist against the wall with frustration. "That he was in this bar, but for fuck's sake, he's nowhere in sight."

"Old information," Kingsley replied with a tired shrug of his own. "Or maybe a tip sent to distract you from Black's movements. It happens, Leon. How's Wilson?"

"Tolerable," Sanders replied uneasily, "but he's not at your level – hell, there's not many Aurors at your level, and I don't he's taking the rivalry between our groups well –"

"I'll talk to him at the office tomorrow," Kingsley said quietly. "You should get some sleep, you look overworked. Being Umbridge's man must be exhausting."

Sanders bristled for a few seconds, but he didn't contradict Kingsley's point – everyone in the Ministry knew it, to some degree. "Good night, Kingsley. Good luck with the game."

"Lord knows he needs it," Hestia said with a chuckle.

"Well?"

"Nothing," Sanders replied tiredly as he left the Hog's Head, scratching idly behind his ear as he lit his wand. "Nothing broke the perimeter?"

"All secure," Wilson said shortly. "Larshall took the rest of the team back to the Ministry for debriefing – where's Perris?"

"Sent him home," Sanders replied with a shrug. "He's a rookie – I let him off easy, let him brag to his wife that we nearly found Sirius Black tonight."

"He should still be debriefed officially." Wilson said disapprovingly. "That's bad discipline –"

"Take it up with Bones later," Sanders snapped. "He's new, and I'm exhausted. Is there anything else you need here, Wilson, or are we done?"

"Just one thing."

"What?"

Wilson's wand snapped up.

"Imperio!"

"That," Aberforth muttered as he carefully shut the door behind him, "was way too close."

"Anti-Apparition Enchantments have been dropped," Tonks said tersely, drumming her fingers on the table as she shifted back to her usual form. "And since we covered pretty much everything earlier, I guess the meeting's over."

"What about Clarissa here?" Arthur Weasley asked kindly, even as Hestia Jones, Elphias Doge, and Dedalus Diggle disappeared with loud cracks. "If she's new to the Order, we should give her an introduction –"

"I'll handle it," Tonks interrupted. "Everything will be fine, Arthur, no worries."

"It is a little intriguing that you managed to arrive here at precisely the right time to help us, Miss Desdame," Kingsley Shacklebolt began coolly, crossing his arms over his chest as the Weasley couple Disapparated.

"Kingsley –"

"It was coincidence only, Shacklebolt," Harry replied smoothly, smoothing his robes. "Luck, nothing more."

"I see," Shacklebolt replied, his eyes narrowing as he met Harry's eyes. "Convenient timing, though. Much... appreciated."

"Just see that you return the favour," Harry replied, his simulacrum's female voice lending a sweet edge to the words.

Tonks coughed. Shacklebolt only gave Harry a deeply distrustful look, and a second later, he Disapparated.

"I'm going to go clean up downstairs," Aberforth said curtly, sweeping the cards off the table into a neat deck. "You're going to catch her up?"

"Yeah," Tonks replied quietly, carefully watching as the old bartender plodded out the door, closing it with a loud bang behind him.

The second the lock clicked, Tonks spun around, and before Harry could fully understand what was happening, she had pulled Harry into a tight embrace, pressing her mouth fiercely against his in a hungry kiss.

"God, I've missed you, Harry," Tonks whispered, her voice hastily cut off by her tongue returning to Harry's mouth. "I've wanted this... and we didn't get it last time –"

Harry was about to protest, but something about this experience felt funny. He felt strangely lightheaded and content, as if there were

nowhere else he wanted to be, other than in her arms... and the hunger for more of Tonks wrapped around him began tingling through his entire body...

His hands moved to her back and behind her head as he began to stir her into Aberforth's spare room, passionately kissing as he moved her back towards the bed, wanting to take her there and then –

"Uh..."

They stopped kissing and looked at the bed – only to see a rather bemused Sirius Black sitting at the end of it, a hint of a smirk on his face.

"Oh, sorry," Tonks panted, a hint of a grin returning to her face. "Sirius, this is Clarissa Desdame, the lawyer who saved your doggy ass tonight."

"And you're going to return the favour by letting her do you – doggy style," Sirius replied wryly, complete with an inappropriate hand gesture that left nothing to Harry's imagination.

"Sirius!"

"You know, I thought doggy style was somewhat of my thing –"

"Oh good god –"

"Does this mean you're a lesbian now, or bisexual?" Sirius asked frankly. "Because, since we're all in the mood, if you're open to a threesome –"

Harry's gut flipped over as a sick feeling rushed through him – a threesome with his godfather? That's... oh Merlin, that's gross!

"Sirius, we're cousins!" Tonks began, scandalized.

"We're Blacks!" Sirius argued. "That sort of thing –"

"Is not going to happen!" Tonks replied fiercely.

Sirius smiled. "I'm just messing with you, Tonks, you know me better than that—"

"We should probably go," Tonks said with a huff as she rose to her feet, "as you're clearly not better yet —"

"No, come on, stay!" Sirius said, feigning anxiousness. "I can watch and critique your technique! And who says I'm not better?"

"Perhaps it's the fact that most of his words are indicative of a brain injury," Harry replied wryly.

Sirius wolf-whistled. "Looks like you got yourself a keeper there, Tonks — smart, snarky, and stacked."

"Well, only part of the time," Harry said as he sat on the edge of the bed, with a grin towards Tonks who immediately got the message. "Tonks, I think we should tell Mr. Black here the truth."

"What?" Sirius asked with confusion. "Truth about what?"

"Remember that simulamancy ritual I was telling you about?" Tonks said conversationally, staring idly at her fingernails.

"Yeah," Sirius replied cautiously. "Incredibly dangerous, expensive, heinously complicated quasi-Dark magic that you and Harry pulled off with stunning success. What about it?"

Harry only looked at Tonks, and then looked at Sirius.

A second later, Sirius got the message, and his face went pale.

"Holy shit," he whispered. "Harry — is that —"

"Yeah," Harry replied softly.

"Wow," Sirius said, shaking his head. "I mean... wow. And when I attacked you that night —"

"That was my other simulacrum," Harry replied steadily, "that took you down."

"And you suggested a threesome," Tonks replied, returning to studying her fingernails.

Sirius went pale, even as Harry and Tonks roared with laughter.

"Harry, I swear, I didn't know –"

"It's okay, Sirius," Harry replied as he pulled his godfather into an embrace. "You didn't know."

"How could I – it's more than a little strange to think of your godson and then realize that he's possessing the body of a gorgeous woman with incredible –"

"Sirius, that's inappropriate!" Tonks exclaimed. "I'm the one who's –"

"Ah, so you two are an item, now!" Sirius said triumphantly. He leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear. "Good catch, mate – very good job!"

"Uh... thanks," Harry replied awkwardly, shifting a bit as Sirius reclined on the bed.

"We're... not really sure where we're at with this," Tonks began hesitantly as she slowly slid her hand into Harry's. "It doesn't help we keep getting interrupted –"

"Hey, by all means, continue!" Sirius said emphatically, pointing at the bed. "I'll just transform and sit in the corner –"

"No."

"Goddamn it," Sirius muttered.

"And either way, I don't really have time to chat," Harry interrupted, tugging on his robes. "Tonks, I need to change before I go meet with Cassane –"

"Is this about the article?" Tonks asked with surprise.

"What article?" Harry asked, momentarily distracted.

"The one we were trying to get from the very beginning," Tonks said with a beaming smile, grabbing the paper from Sirius' bedside table and tossing it to Harry. "And we made the front page again."

Harry looked down, only to see a massive picture of Cassane, seemingly delivering a very forceful speech in the Ministry itself. Below it, he read:

SUPREME MUGWUMP DEMANDS INQUIRY:

'MINISTRY CORRUPTION WILL NO LONGER BE TOLERATED'

By Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent & Paulus Amoccio, International Correspondent

In an unprecedented move, backed by new, shocking evidence, Nathan Cassane, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, had demanded the resignation of Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge and a full inquiry into all Departments of the Ministry on charges of conspiracy, bribery, coercion, and gross incompetence.

"It is high time the truth comes to light regarding the Minister's bewildering, belligerent, and outright insane behaviour," Cassane said in a statement yesterday afternoon from his manor, which was then magically broadcast over the Wizarding Wireless Network. "His flagrantly unjustifiable and dare I say illegal actions regarding Albus Dumbledore's 'treason' are unacceptable, and the International Confederation of Wizards will no longer stand for threats of 'war' against the most powerful wizard in the world. My patience for Fudge's stupidity and blind fear has run out."

Said actions include startling new information regarding the actions of one Dolores Umbridge, the head of the Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team. Miss Umbridge, while under the consent of the

Minister, seized and read all mail at Hogwarts, used highly regulated Blood Quills unlawfully during detentions and classes upon students, and accused both the Headmaster of Hogwarts and Harry Potter of treason without substantiated evidence. According to sworn statements from both Dumbledore and Potter, all of these 'powers' were obtained through appeals to the Minister of Magic himself.

The Minister's hostility, however, towards Albus Dumbledore, has been a well-known fact. Recent information suggests that on the very same day as the opening of the new bank in Diagon Alley, Minister Fudge was going to proclaim an act of war against Dumbledore, an act the Wizengamot is now calling blatantly unjust and unsupported by solid evidence or reasoning. The Minister was unavailable for comment.

Cassane also elaborated upon a new, very real concern – that a highly mobile gang of former Death Eaters are now operating within England, including the now infamous Malfoy family, who according to new sources, had been receiving gold for this group from the now deceased Aphrodite Zabini.

"There have been a number of attacks – upon Gringotts, upon Ollivanders, upon the Ministry, upon Harry Potter himself on the road to Hogsmeade in October. These cowards even attempted to raise their wands twice against me within the past few weeks," Cassane continued. "This group is attempting to stir up the same fear that ran free when You-Know-Who was active – and as Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, and as a citizen of this country, I will not allow this to happen again."

Cassane has called for a massive investigation into the workings and infrastructure of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, particularly regarding the case files related to the attacks – many of which blame was previously placed upon Harry Potter. Potter has vehemently denied involvement in these attacks, and has instead supported Cassane's measure to further investigate the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in particular the questionable actions of one Dmitri Kemester, a high-ranking Hit Wizard. Kemester was unavailable for comment.

"Having spoken personally to Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived," Cassane added, "I find no case of evil or foul intent behind him, and that the numerous charges levelled against him have no basis in fact or reality. It is the same with Dumbledore – the fact that such charges have been allowed to stand for so long is a travesty of justice."

Cassane has also called for a full investigation into the actions of the Departments of Magical Law and Finance, calling their recent actions leading towards the creation of the new bank 'dangerously unregulated' and 'bordering on illegality'.

"Money has been siphoned from reputable sources to finance the creation of this bank, and only a few unaccountable executives – one who was Lucius Malfoy – know the full extent of these machinations," Cassane said in his address. "These machinations have already resulted in a number of wizard and goblin deaths, and transparency is required if this bank is to have any vestige of legitimacy in the public eye."

Perhaps the most shocking evidence unveiled was the Ministry's attempts to control this very paper and the truths recorded by the international journalists in this country. It has been revealed that Barnabus Cuffe was in close, highly suspect contact with the Minister, and if not for the Supreme Mugwump's influence, this article would not be printed here today. Cassane has condemned this, and has sworn to ensure that 'the Prophet becomes and remains a free paper of our nation, not a propaganda instrument.'

"While I understand that the Ministry is in a state of disarray," Cassane stated, "due to the recent attack, we can use this rebuilding opportunity as a chance to ensure that the cancers are eradicated before the walls are rebuilt around them."

Further details regarding the planned inquiry on page 9...

Harry set down the paper and let out a soft whistle. "Holy shit."

"Well, this confirms everything we know about Cassane," Tonks said heavily. "When he takes a side, he takes it all the way."

"Voldemort's going to kill him," Sirius whispered, shaking his head. "Cassane's powerful, but even he won't be able to spot everything –"

Harry's eyes snapped up. "He won't accept Auror protection, but if he participates actively in the inquiries in the Ministry, they won't have a chance to take a shot without alerting the entire wizarding world –"

"Harry, it's not that simple," Sirius said, leaning back wearily. "Voldemort has people in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Tonks' eyes shot up. "What?"

"Rogan Wilson's a Death Eater, Tonks – I saw him in the circle myself."

Tonks swore. "Then we all got luckier than we thought – if Wilson had gone up here instead of Sanders, you would have been found out. Sanders is at least loyal –"

"To Umbridge, not the Department," Sirius spat.

"Either way, he's not an immediate threat," Tonks replied tensely. "What about the other Hit Wizards and Aurors – do you know if there's anyone else?"

Sirius held up his hands helplessly. "Tonks, I saw one meeting, and even then I didn't get much information – other than that Voldemort plans on attacking Azkaban over Christmas –"

"And Dumbledore suspected that already," Tonks finished, swearing again under her breath.

"What about Kemester?" Harry asked suddenly. "Is he a Death Eater?"

"No," Sirius replied emphatically. "That, I'm sure of – I get the feeling that Voldemort doesn't want anything to do with him – and really,

considering what the man's done, I can't be surprised. Kemester's not exactly subtle."

"Guess it clears that up," Harry muttered, running a hand through the long blonde hair of his simulacrum, thinking as fast as he could. "There's too many variables right now – too many problems, and too much uncertainty."

"Yeah, between the Ministry, the goblins, the attacks at Hogwarts, Voldemort, and whether or not you and Tonks are going to get down and dirty any time soon, there really is a lot going on," Sirius replied seriously, his smile brightening at Harry and Tonks' glares.

"What we need," Harry said firmly, grabbing a scrap of paper from the bedside table and beginning to scribble, "is a plan, and more information, so we can take on the problems one at a time."

"I agree," Sirius replied, winking at Tonks suggestively. "Just keep me informed about when you two are going to – ow, what was that for, Tonks?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tonks replied with a smile as she elbowed Sirius hard in the ribs again. "Right, so with Cassane in the fight now, we can take the Ministry and goblin problems off the list – Cassane will negotiate on our behalf while Dumbledore's gone, and he'll drive a hard bargain."

"Do we have any idea where Dumbledore is?" Harry asked impatiently, looking up from the paper.

Both Sirius and Tonks sobered and shook their heads, and Harry felt a cold rush of fear. Voldemort has an open field with Dumbledore out of the way... and we're very vulnerable without him...

"According to the goblins, he was last seen leaving Gringotts," Tonks replied tersely, "reportedly going to the Ministry. But a lot of things happened that night, so..."

"We have to make the assumption that he's gone, and make the best of it," Harry said briskly, turning back to his paper as he tried to

steady his breathing. "Tonks, we need to find out who else in the Ministry is working for Voldemort, because the ways things are going, if we don't move fast, we won't see Voldemort's plans until they hit us upside the head. Think you can handle that?"

"Harry, the Aurors are already overworked as it is –"

"Just keep your eyes open, Tonks, that's all we need," Harry replied quickly. "Sirius... look, you used to get really good grades in school and all that, right?"

"It wasn't like the material was hard or anything," Sirius replied with a bit of a huff. "Why?"

"Tonks, did you enchant the room –"

"It's been enchanted for the past few weeks, Harry, there's nothing to worry about," Tonks replied immediately.

"Lock the door, then."

Once the lock had clicked, Harry leaned close to Tonks and his godfather. "Tonks, I'm sure you've figured this out by now, but something went wrong with the simulamancy ritual, and I d-don't want another disaster like in the Ministry happening again. Tonks, if you could get Sirius the books, he probably could help us understand some of the theory of this magic –"

"Whoa, whoa, I'm no magical theoretician," Sirius interrupted, holding up his hands hastily.

"Yeah, but you know more about Transfiguration than either of us," Tonks replied exasperatedly. "I mean, come on – you managed the Animagus transformation when you were fifteen!"

"What about Cassane?" Harry asked tensely.

"That would mean telling him about the simulamancy –"

"Wouldn't matter, he already knows," Tonks replied tiredly.

Harry swallowed hard against the sudden rush of fear – the secret, his secret, was out. "Are you sure?"

"Either that or he's a damned good guesser or bluffer," Tonks replied grimly, her hand clenching into a fist. "I'm still not sure I trust him, though – I think we should let Sirius have a crack at it first – and if he gets bored, he can go take a shot at that bloody barrier blocking off Headquarters."

"Why would I?" Sirius muttered. "It's not like I want to go back there anyways..."

"I need to talk to Cassane, about a potential solution to the attacks at Hogwarts, but I'll hold off on mentioning simulamancy – we shouldn't rely on him too much until we know if he can be trusted," Harry said carefully. "Plus, I wouldn't mind getting some answers from him on... some things."

"What things?"

"Not important, not important," Harry said hastily, scribbling quickly as his list took shape.

"While we're on the subject of the attacks at Hogwarts," Sirius said heavily, reaching around Tonks and pulling a bedside dresser open, "I think you'll want to show Cassane this."

He gingerly pulled a small, finely cut piece of polished purple glass from the drawer, and handed it to Harry. The edges of the glass were sharp, and he readjusted his grip to get a better look at the strange object.

"Weird," Tonks murmured. "Every time I see that damned bit of rock, I'm amazed."

"At what?" Harry asked cautiously.

"That, apparently, is what allowed me to get possessed by my uncle's ghost," Sirius replied darkly. "Kreacher slipped it on me, and old

Cygnus leapt straight in. Apparently it's some sort of focusing crystal – hell, it sort of looks like one of those Muggle prisms they use to make rainbows. Might want to show Cassane that – it could help."

"Why didn't we find any of these around those getting possessed at Hogwarts, though?" Harry asked, utterly mystified as he tucked the purple prism into his robes.

"Beats the hell out of me –"

"Wait a second," Tonks said suddenly. "Harry, if we're going to fix the simulamancy, we're going to need money – those potions and the materials aren't cheap, and Malfoy hit your vault."

Harry felt some of the blood drain from his face as his stomach began to squirm uncomfortably. "No problem," he replied, trying to keep an easy tone as he shifted in his seat on the bed, "we can just –"

"Harry, I don't have the money for this either," Tonks replied, swallowing hard. "I'm barely scraping by as it is right now – the entire Department took a pay cut last week to repair the Ministry –"

"Okay, that's fine... Sirius?"

But Sirius wasn't saying anything. His entire face had gone ashen, and he looked as though he just stepped out of Azkaban.

"Oh... oh fuck."

"Sirius?"

"I remember it," Sirius whispered, blood rushing back to his face as rage filled his voice. "After the Death Eater meeting, Malfoy came up to me just before I went after you – he asked me to sign something... oh fuck, I signed my vault into his bank! Fucking hell!"

Tonks swore, and Harry felt his stomach squirm a little harder. How were they going to get the money to fix the simulamancy –

"We could just leave it as it is," he began slowly. "We – we don't have to fix the simulamancy yet –"

"Harry, we need that money," Tonks said, and for the first time, he saw a strangely haunted look creeping onto her face. "It's... I mean, I..."

"Tonks, are you okay?" Harry asked with concern, his hand sliding back around hers.

"We need to fix it," she whispered, her eyes suddenly moist. "Harry... it's scaring me, I don't want... we need to fix it."

"Then we need money," Sirius said firmly, slamming his fist into his palm. "And if I remember correctly, there's a pile of it sealed away in Gringotts that belongs to you, Harry."

"The Potter Vaults," Harry whispered, a sudden rush of adrenaline filling him. Finally, he was going to get an answer on that. And it's about fucking time...

"The files were incomplete –"

"Doesn't matter," Harry said in a hard voice. "Lupin knows more than he's telling, and he owes me an explanation. Damn it, if he wants me to trust him, he'll tell me the truth."

Tonks shifted slightly in her seat. "Harry, I've already talked to Lupin, two weeks ago."

Harry's eyes went wide as he twisted towards her. "What? Before the attacks? Why didn't you tell me? What did you find out?"

"Before the attacks?" Tonks asked, bewildered. "Harry, the attacks on the new bank and the Ministry were three weeks ago."

Three weeks... that's impossible, I wasn't out in the Hospital Wing for that long... since the Ministry attacks, it's been four days, by my reckoning...

But then he remembered sitting on the battlements with Luna, watching as the orb she had fired into the sky soared upwards – and then accelerated a little faster, as if it were moving in another world entirely...

He remembered Dumbledore fiddling with his dissembled watch on his desk – how the Headmaster had been late, as if something in Hogwarts was slowing him down...

Except it's not the watch, Harry thought with a rush of horror. It's time itself... somehow, time is running slower around Hogwarts... and it all seemed to start right after Tonks and I made this simulacrum... that's what Luna and Dumbledore were trying to figure out.

"We might be in trouble."

He explained his hypothesis, and a second later, Tonks' eyes were incredulous.

Sirius was laughing.

"Sirius, this isn't funny!" Harry snarled. "If I'm stuck at Hogwarts, I could lose days outside of Hogwarts!"

"Harry, I don't think you're seeing the other side of this, though," Sirius said, holding his stomach as he raised a finger with his other hand. "If you're slowed at Hogwarts, anything your antagonist over there does is slowed too. He won't be able to execute Voldemort's orders in time – and I know exactly what happens to those people!"

"We'll need more proof, before we can start claiming that our simulamancy messed this up –" Tonks began.

"And that means you need me to try and work through the magic," Sirius replied with a nod. "Although even in my hardest Arithmancy courses, I've never had to work through a problem like this –"

"It also means," Harry interrupted, his eyes slowly lighting up, "that I have more time than just tonight – I mean, tonight inside Hogwarts – to contact Cassane!"

"Hang on, we need to prove this hypothesis first, Harry," Tonks said warily, as she rose to her feet and began pulling books from her bag – books Harry immediately recognized as the simulamancy books. "That means you go back to Hogwarts tonight, confirm the truth somehow, give the information about the distortion to Moody, and then get back here. I'll stay here and start working through things with Sirius, see if we can get some basic parameters behind this whole time distortion mess."

"I was planning on talking to Cassane tonight –"

"Probably better if you don't wake him up in the middle of the night, anyways," Sirius added fairly, already becoming engrossed in one of the books. "This is weird stuff, Tonks, how did you manage to get through most of it?"

"A lot of lucky guesses, and some faith that I'd be able to pull it off," Tonks replied with a shrug.

"All right, all right," Harry said, rising to his feet. "Tonks, just before I leave, you said you talked to Lupin – what did he tell you?"

Tonks took a deep breath, as if she was steeling herself. "Harry, you'll want to sit down. Sirius, put the book down – I'll only want to say this once."

"Why?" Harry asked curiously, returning to the edge of the bed. "What did Lupin tell you?"

"The truth," Tonks said grimly, "and neither of you are going to like it."

Lupin slid the last of his plates back onto the makeshift shelf, nodding with satisfaction.

"That's the last of them," he muttered, running a hand through his hair as he moved to his chair by the fireplace, picking up his book as he sat down. He didn't really understand it, but just the act of cleaning up felt good to him – as if everything was finally coming together in its proper place.

Now all I need is a steady supply of Wolfsbane Potion, and I've got the life I've always wanted, he thought wistfully, cracking open his book and carefully setting his wand down on the leather arm of the chair. No Fenrir Greyback, no Ministry breathing down my neck, no Order...

He closed his eyes for a few seconds as the old guilt surged inside of him, but this time, he had something to tamp it back. Now that Tonks knows, she'll tell Harry and Sirius, and any safety I will have had with the Order will be gone. It was good while it lasted, but now I have to move on...

He tried to concentrate on the words, but they were swimming in his view, forming into Sirius' scowling face –

"He doesn't want me around," he said curtly to himself, snapping the book shut and tossing it back on the table. "The Marauders are broken – Sirius and I aren't going to work things out the way things are..."

He looked at the dusty bottle, sitting on the corner of the dingy kitchen shelf. It would be so easy – a friend who doesn't judge, who trusts me, who wouldn't give a damn about what I've done... the best kind of friend... or the worst kind...

"I can't keep thinking about that," Lupin muttered, rising to his feet to prod at the smoldering coals in the fireplace with a poker. "I just have to move on –"

CRASH.

He instinctually dove for cover as the windows shattered inwards, peppering the room with hot glass. He rolled towards the wall, grabbing his wand from the chair as he moved –

Only to watch in astonishment as the door exploded, the thick wood shattering like a ripped, flaming napkin. He squinted to see through the flames –

"You should have run."

He spun on his heel to Disapparate, but the subsequent ringing pain surging through his head as if he had been bludgeoned with a saucepan immediately told him that Apparition wasn't going to get him anywhere.

He did, however, have a very good idea where the wand inches from his face were going to get him.

"I wouldn't move, either," the dark, hooded figure hissed, his voice rumbling behind the disguise of a charm, raising his wand a little higher as he pulled a jagged silver knife from a pocket in his robes. Lupin stiffened – the smell of the silver was unmistakable, and every inch it moved closer made him shudder.

"I've done this before," the hooded figure hissed. "Make one move and you die in agony."

"You wouldn't kill me," Lupin said as the man deftly disarmed him. "You hunted me – you'll want what I know."

"I already know more than you think," the hooded man growled, pulling back his hood with an easy grace, revealing lank skin, greasy hair, and dark, furious eyes. "You made a promise, and you broke it."

Very real fear was pounding in Lupin's heart now. "Severus, I can explain –"

"You told Tonks everything, even regardless of the blackmail I used," Severus Snape snarled, shoving Lupin bodily into the wall with surprising strength. "Even despite your vow –"

"I only told her what I knew, it wasn't the whole story!" Lupin exclaimed, his eyes darting around the room for something – anything – he could use to drive that damned silver knife away. "And it was pretty shoddy blackmail, to be honest –"

"It worked, didn't it? For five years?"

Lupin didn't have a response for that.

"You broke your vow, Lupin," Snape hissed, his eyes glittering with cold malice. "And as I promised, you'll regret that decision – though not for long."

"What – Severus, please –"

"Regrets, after all," Snape whispered harshly, "are for the living."

There was a flash of light, a sickening spinning sensation, and Lupin only had one thought as he blacked out.

My god, what have I done?

Author's Note: yeah, I know it's been a while since I updated - exams and a job-hunt, mostly, taking up the majority of my time. But here comes the longest chapter yet of this story, and I hope you all enjoy!

It was marble... everything was marble. The walls, the floors, the arched ceilings, the plants, the books, everything was stone –

Except for her. A faint spark of vivacious life, descending the marble stairs, her curly hair unbounded and fluttering as she moved. Wearing a sheath of emerald green, her eyes the cracked mirrors so typical of her kind – cold and unfeeling, but just beneath the surface was so much feeling, so much passion, so much rage...

He stood in the foyer, beneath the gold-and-crystal chandelier, his eyes flinty as he watched her every move. The bounce of her hair, the growing smile upon her lips, the heaving of her budding breasts, the breasts he had never seen exposed...

Her hand graced the marble railing, and her smile grew insidious as she eyed him, her eyes looking like nothing more than flames bouncing between trees in a lightning struck forest...

"You're here," she whispered, and yet it echoed across the hall. For a moment, he was confused – what exactly was here? But then he saw the crest – his crest, and he knew instantly where he was. He was home, and she was waiting for him.

But there was something about her smile, something sneaky, something devilishly playful, so uncharacteristic of her. It was as if she knew something – no, she did know something, and she was waiting for him to speak –

"But you're too late."

He struggled for words, his eyes racing around the room. His robes were flapping around him as the wind increased, tearing at his hair and face.

"For what?" His voice was ragged, but it rang out loud and clear across his foyer.

Her smile was gone, and replaced with something implacable – something horrifying. There was no expression on her face now, she was becoming marble...

And all around him, the marble was exploding into flames.

But the voice was still there, even as the outlines of the crest erupted with fire, crumpling and twisting horrifically, the snake eating its own tail –

"Too late for me, too late for here... and too late for you."

He could only scream as she erupted into flames, her dress going black as the flames licked it to tatters. He looked up and even as he wondered how marble could burn, he could hear the clinking of the chandelier chain warping and breaking –

He looked up, the flaming crystals were rushing towards his face, and they were turning into cyan blue acid, but he knew it would burn just the same –

There was a rush of hot, searing pain, and Draco Malfoy awoke in a hot sweat, his eyes wild with terror.

He felt his gut churn. Hastily yanking up his pyjama pants, he stumbled out of bed, rushing towards the bathroom connected to the dank and humid Slytherin dormitory. He didn't bother stopping at the mirror – he only just reached the toilet in time, purging whatever was left in his stomach.

The vomiting soon passed, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep the rest of the night – hell, considering the rest of the castle, he was amazed he got any sleep at all.

Rising shakily to his feet, he staggered past the mirrors that were once his vanity and now his bane, and picked up his wand, which had been sitting on his bedside table. He could hear a few uneasy murmurs as he passed by the beds in the dormitory, and he wrinkled his nose in disgust as he heard the rustle of a magazine page.

Whatever puts them to sleep, Malfoy thought disgustedly, as he wiped the thin sheen of sweat from his forehead again and entered the Common Room –

"Couldn't sleep again?"

Malfoy nearly jumped, but then he recognized Blaise Zabini's snort of derision from his spot by the smouldering fire. "Nobody can, right now, as you perfectly well know."

Zabini shrugged and turned a page of his Daily Prophet. "I'll live."

"We also know whose fault it is."

Zabini rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Nott's, with this thrice damned plan that we're in. You disturb the spirits –"

"Blaise!"

"Nobody's here, Malfoy, so shut up," Zabini snapped. "But the pattern's not difficult to discern. We get back to Hogwarts, and on the very first night, while all the professors are distracted by H.A.I.T. and the Opening Feast, we instigate the Dark Lord's plan."

"As much good as it's done us," Malfoy muttered without thinking.

"What was that?"

Malfoy looked around the room carefully before sitting across from Zabini. "I have to wonder," he began in a very quiet whisper, "when we – as in my family – will receive just compensation for everything we've lost, everything we've sacrificed."

"The Dark Lord rewards his helpers –"

"And what about collateral damage?" Malfoy retorted. "Everything that's happened to me or my father has been brushed aside –"

"Mostly because you were idiots," Zabini interrupted crisply, turning another page of his paper.

Malfoy felt a surge of anger at the black teenager's words – how dare he demean what the Malfoys had sacrificed? "Don't forget that you lost your mother too –"

Zabini's eyes flashed. "And I'm letting Nott handle my revenge, and so far, he's doing a pretty damn good job of it. And sure, I want to make that miserable son-of-a-bitch Potter pay for what he did to my family, but I'm also saw what happened to you. I'm far from stupid, Draco – I'd prefer to confront Potter when I'm in the superior position."

"I didn't think he'd attack in the middle of the Potions classroom!" Malfoy snarled through clenched teeth, his white-knuckled hands gripping the arms of the chair harder than he would grip a speeding broomstick.

Zabini shrugged. "That's why I'm not an idiot, and you are."

Malfoy abruptly stood. Zabini finally looked up from his paper, a bemused expression on his face.

"Are you going to hit me?"

"No," Malfoy growled. "We're going to go find Nott – I have a concern regarding our mission he needs to address, and I know for a fact he's not in our dormitory – he can't sleep whenever Crabbe and Goyle are trying to get off –"

"That's disgusting," Zabini said with supreme disdain, "but I see your point. It's regarding the Slytherin issue, I'm assuming?"

"Yes, I want to know what he's going to do –"

"It's already been solved."

Malfoy did draw his wand this time, but Nott only giggled as he stepped out of the shadows, raising his hands with a gleeful smile on his face.

"Thought you told me the room was deserted!" Malfoy snapped, not taking his eyes away from Nott, who had drawn his own wand with a single graceful second.

"I didn't see him when I swept the room –"

"Nor would you," Nott said condescendingly, "because that spell is straight out of the Restricted Section – let's you hide effortlessly wherever there's a shadow. Truly a wonderful example of what the Dark Arts can provide a man."

Malfoy and Zabini exchanged tense looks – neither of them had heard of such a spell. Did Nott's knowledge of the Dark Arts go deeper than either of them suspected? And what was it doing to Nott's sanity?

Nothing good, by the looks of him, Malfoy thought to himself as Nott gave another dry giggle as he began to aimlessly caper around the room.

"Anyways, anyways, I found out the solution to your little Slytherin conundrum," Nott said, slowing as he seemed to bounce into a chair. "I just so happened to overhear Potter muttering to himself as he headed up towards Ravenclaw Tower just a few minutes ago, and I heard him mention a certain name."

"And?" Zabini asked impatiently.

"I figured that we can accelerate the cycle," Nott said smugly. "A two-for-one in one, if you catch my drift. Fill the missing hole with an interpolation and then continue down the curve."

"Do you have the Dark Lord's permission?" Zabini asked suspiciously.

"Oh, I think I do," Nott said with a wicked smile. "So let's go!"

"You mean now?" Malfoy asked incredulously. "It's the middle of the night –"

Nott's wand snapped up, and before Malfoy could say another word, the wand was an inch away from Malfoy's scarred nose.

"I mean now," Nott growled.

Malfoy looked at Nott's face. The normally weedy-looking Slytherin was now wasted, his eyes hollowed and dank within their sockets, red from lack of sleep and glazed by something Malfoy didn't have any desire to experience himself. His cheeks were flushed, his teeth were clenched, and his hair was falling in lank, unwashed tangles around his face.

He looks worse than me, Malfoy noted with astonishment. If this is what the magic he's using is doing to him... the Dark Lord had a damn good reason for not getting me involved directly, to say nothing of Nott's sanity...

"What about the Hufflepuff?" Zabini asked curtly. "Will there be disruptions there?"

"Oh no," Nott said with a gleeful, maddened smirk as he gestured for the two Slytherins to follow him. "He's just perfect, and I'm looking forward to when he comes into the sunshine."

I'm not, Malfoy thought to himself, restraining a shudder – he could only imagine what Nott was doing to him.

One look at Zabini told him the other Slytherin thought the exact same.

"It's a time distortion, Luna," Harry gasped, clutching the stitch in his chest as he leaned heavily against the wall, completely out of breath.

Luna clasped her hands as she leaned against the opposite wall. "That's interesting."

Harry gaped at her, completely astounded. "I thought... Luna, I thought this would be a bigger deal to you –"

"It's interesting," Luna repeated, a hint of a smile growing on her face. "Thank you for telling me, Isabelle – it means a lot to me."

"Can you do... hell, I dunno, any research on it?" Harry asked desperately, knowing all too well that every second he spent with Luna, nearly five more clicked by outside Hogwarts. "Books, the library, anything?"

"I can try," Luna said with a wistful smile, "but I'll only have so much time, if you catch my drift."

"Very funny, Luna," Harry replied sarcastically. "Very, very funny. Well, since you're not sleeping, can you try doing some of the research tonight? I'm sort of in a big hurry right now."

"Is that why you ran all the way up to the battlements to find me?" Luna asked, her smile slightly perturbed as she raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I assumed you'd be around here," Harry muttered. "And you still haven't put any more clothes on."

"Harry," Luna said patiently, "please don't be dim. I already told you this is what I wear to bed."

"But you're not in bed!"

"I could be," Luna said with a wink. "You just can't see it yet, Isabelle."

Harry shook his head. "My name's not... you know what, never mind." He turned around, walking as quickly as he dared across the slick and narrow battlements towards the secret door.

"Harry?"

"What?" Harry asked tensely, turning quickly and nearly slipping because of it.

"You know there's only one way they'll let us be together," Luna said quietly. Her smile was gone, and her blue eyes met Harry's for a long, long second.

"Huh? What do you mean, together? Luna, what are you – "

"Dead."

"What?"

"I can't put it any more plainly, Harry," Luna replied solemnly. "You should hurry."

"Yeah, yeah." Harry shook his head with growing confusion and disbelief. "I don't understand half of what you – you know what, you're impossible!"

"No," Luna interrupted, "just very, very unlikely. Good night, Isabelle."

"So?" Moody growled.

"So what?" Harry returned, closing the door tightly behind him. "I told her, if that's what you mean. She'll research what she can find about the distortion, and then get back to me."

"And you trust her?" Moody asked sceptically.

"Don't understand half the bloody things she says," Harry replied darkly, locking the door with a twist and crossing the room to slump into his chair, "but yeah, I trust her."

"You've made her a target, though," Moody said curtly, slamming his book shut after finishing his note, "and given that we all now have a time constraint, we can't afford to lose her. I'll tell Flitwick to keep an eye on her, and I'll do some of the research myself."

"If I can get to Cassane –"

"That's assumes he tells you the truth, that assumes he's reliable, and from the article that you showed me, that assumes he's still

alive!" Moody snarled, slamming his fist on the table. "I don't like relying on that man –"

"I know, I know, but without Dumbledore, he's the best chance we've got," Harry replied, putting his hand to his forehead to fight back a rising headache. "Do you have any water?"

"Why?" Moody grunted.

"I'm thirsty. And not the charm this time, please?"

Moody's mismatched eyes both rolled, but a wave of his wand filled a glass with water, and he slid it across the desk to Harry, who drank it greedily.

"You have proof about this distortion?"

"Tonks and Sirius both confirmed it," Harry replied between swallows.

"And Rogan Wilson's a Death Eater?"

"According to Sirius, he is," Harry said tiredly.

"And Sirius was possessed because he held this rock?" Moody pursued, raising the little purple crystal and examining it critically. "Doesn't look like much, but with Voldemort running things, you can't be surprised."

"From what Sirius said, it just enabled the initial possession," Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "Look, this just proves my point – who else, besides Malfoy, knows enough Black family history to orchestrate something like this? I mean, it was Malfoy's grandfather on his mother's side who possessed Sirius!"

"We still can't make a move until we know how exactly the possession works!" Moody snapped.

"I know, I know, it's just –"

"Fortunately, I had an idea," Moody replied, turning unexpectedly towards the door of his private quarters. "Come out, you two."

Harry's eyes widened as the door creaked upon, to reveal two identical, hard-eyed twin brothers. Conflicting feelings of surprise, relief, and unexpected terror flooded through Harry as he saw them – he had never seen them look so...

"Good to see you too, Harry," George Weasley said with a grim nod, a forced note of his old cheerfulness in his voice.

"Right..." Harry said, taking a deep breath. They don't know it was your simulacrum, act normal or Moody's going to suspect something! "You two –"

"They're of age, they're smarter than most of this school, and they have the balls to go up against something they know absolutely nothing about," Moody growled. "And they also don't give a rat's arse about missing classes, so they can tail Malfoy full time."

"Don't worry, Harry," Fred said with a fake smile, "we'll keep that pesky ferret under wraps until we find out what he's up to –"

"Moody, can I talk to you for a second?" Harry interrupted, pointing towards the open door to the Auror's rooms.

Once they were both inside and the door closed, Harry took a deep breath. "This is a bad idea."

"I'm not the biggest fan of it either, but they're the closest thing to the Order that I've got here, and I've got to make the best with what I have," Moody replied curtly.

"I know they can take care of themselves – no, actually, I can't, because Charlie's dead, and from what Ron told me, they took it badly." Harry swallowed hard. "And they were unpredictable before..."

"They'll get the job done," Moody said grimly, but there was something about Moody's voice that sent a dark chill down Harry's spine.

"Are you..."

"Am I what, Potter?" Moody growled. "I'm doing what needs to be done, with whatever I have at my disposal. Believe me, I don't like this as much as you do."

"So you're using the fact that they're willing to do anything... t-to get revenge. You're using that –"

Moody's hand grabbed the front of Harry's shirt and before Harry knew it, he was very close to Moody's furious face. "What choice do I have, Potter? They're not afraid, they're willing to fight, and they're bloody competent. I'm not going to throw them away – and I'm not going to let them die either, if that's what you're implying. They'll have my Invisibility Cloak –"

"That's good for one –"

"And yours as well."

"What?" Harry exploded, as Moody let go of Harry to produce the Invisibility Cloak, folded neatly on a nearby table. "You had no right to take that – that's mine!"

"I need to keep them alive," Moody snapped, "and since when did you get it into your head that you have a right to privacy?"

"You still should have –"

"Quit bitching, Potter, it's unbecoming of you. And on the note of things you have that I could use, the twins also told me about a little something called the 'Marauder's Map', so I grabbed that from your trunk as well."

Harry struggled to keep his fury under control as Moody picked up the battered scrap of parchment sitting next to the Invisibility Cloak. "I thought you said you wouldn't interfere in my affairs –"

"And I normally wouldn't – even though I'd very much like to know what brand of arcane ritual you dredged up to sneak out of the

school," Moody growled. "But, as that's irrelevant at the moment, I'll let it slide. Let's take a look at this map – you know how to activate it?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, taking the parchment and drawing his wand. Touching it, like he had done countless times before, he whispered, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

There was a flash, and Harry felt searing pain in his hand. He hastily dropped the Marauder's Map and wrung his hand, blinking back tears against the horrific burning pain.

"Fuck, what the hell was that? Not even when Snape –"

"There is no good, or evil," Moody read, picking up the Marauder's Map with interest. "There is only a line, and the time we choose to cross it." He looked up and met Harry's eyes. "Guess we're not going to be using this. Fucking glorified fortune-cookie paper..."

Harry took the map from Moody's hands and stared at the writing. It wasn't his father's, or Sirius', or Lupin's, or even Pettigrew's. It wasn't even Tom Riddle's, the only other magical writing he was familiar with. This writing was jagged, as if the quill had a bloody edge and had sliced the words onto the parchment rather than have written them.

"We're out of time, Potter," Moody growled. "You're going to go find Cassane, correct?"

"As quickly as possible," Harry muttered, shouldering past Moody as he headed out of his quarters. "Time for some answers."

It was a strangely beautiful view from the sweeping patio of Nott Manor. The building was set onto a ridge, and the patio extended outwards from the ridge, held to the house by clawed beams and a considerable bit of magic. Even a Squib walking across the patio, shaded by many stone sculptures and hanging bolts of opaque cloth, could feel the power thrum beneath every step.

To Lord Voldemort, it was an interesting place indeed.

He eyed the sky to the east, the manor behind him. The raised patio surrounded the manor on all sides except the south, but he watched the sky to the east, where the flicker of sunlight turned the sky a deep red. He knew that some of the sky's colours, at least around the manor, would be twisted by the net of magic surrounding the grounds, but he didn't mind.

Silhouetted against a bloody sky, but yet a sunrise, he knew the image would be most appropriate.

"Bring him in."

He did not turn around at the scuffle behind him, but he heard the panting, and he could vividly smell the fear. It was a shame that he had to take time away from his experiments for this, but certain things were best accomplished in person – particularly things like these.

"Have him sit down."

There was a crack, and the squeak of metal on wood, and Voldemort turned his head. Not enough to indicate that he was turning around, but to a mirror that he had placed and enchanted very carefully, where he could see everything behind him, yet the man being viewed could see nothing.

Voldemort's lips turned upwards into a tight, lipless smile as he saw the utterly terrified face of Barnabus Cuffe, editor of the Daily Prophet.

"I trust you know why you are here."

He saw Cuffe's white face nod quickly, and in the growing light, Voldemort could see thin streaks of tears trickling down the man's pallid cheeks.

"You printed an article written by Rita Skeeter, on the behest of Albus Dumbledore, Nathan Cassane, and Harry Potter."

Cuffe nodded again, and Voldemort knew that the man did not trust himself to speak, although he had already soiled himself.

"This article is very dangerous, both to the Ministry, the bank in which you have backed, and your very paper. If anything, by allowing it to be printed, you have signed your own warrants for your complete destruction."

Another nod, another shudder bringing fresh tears, and Voldemort's smile grew.

"I only have one thing to ask you."

Barnabus Cuffe visibly trembled in his seat.

"Do you want a waffle?"

It clearly wasn't the question that Cuffe had been prepared for, and his eyes widened comically wide. "I... I –"

"I asked a question, Cuffe, I would like an answer," Voldemort said sternly, turning around this time to emphasize his last word. Cuffe only barely stifled a scream, but Voldemort did not care – he had choreographed this very carefully. "I will ask again: do you want a waffle?"

"I... I –"

"Yes... or no?" Voldemort asked dangerously.

"Y-yes! Yes, please, my Lord!" Cuffe said desperately, his handsome face filled with the anxiety of a man who knew that any wrong word would lead to his instant, horrifying death.

But Voldemort had no intent of killing the craven lump of a man – at least not yet.

"Felix, please bring Mr. Cuffe a waffle with three slices of bacon and freshly sliced strawberries," Voldemort ordered coldly, approaching the table at a brisk pace. "And a glass of orange juice, if you so would."

"Of course, my lord," Felix Nott said with a bow as he left the patio.

"My Lord, I can explain – " Cuffe began quickly, choking back sobs.

"There is no need for an explanation, Mr. Cuffe," Voldemort said calmly, reaching the table and towering over the terrified editor. "I know that you were simply a pawn – first of Lucius' daring game, and then Cassane's. Now, it is time that you played my game – except I will not have you as a pawn."

"I – I –"

"Silence," Voldemort ordered, and Cuffe shut his mouth so quickly his teeth clicked together. "Your waffle is here."

Nott set the breakfast tray down on the table in front of Cuffe and left the patio. Cuffe stared at the food blankly, as if he had no idea what it was.

"I suggest you eat," Voldemor said dangerously. "I'm given to know that waffles are not as good when they are cold."

Cuffe picked up his fork with his left hand and awkwardly began to piece off chunks of waffle with the side of the fork. He kept his right hand still at his side, as if he was afraid to move it, something Voldemort found quite interesting.

"Is it good?" Voldemort asked, his red eyes blazing, after the man had taken a few small bites.

"Y-yes, my Lord!" Cuffe stammered. "B-best waffle I've ever tasted –"

"Good," Voldemort replied smoothly, uncaring whether or not Cuffe had lied or not. "I know that you have a waffle, with exactly three strips of bacon and freshly sliced strawberries every day, along with a single glass of orange juice – now what does this tell you about Lord Voldemort?"

Cuffe's eyes could scarcely grow much wider, but the utter terror on his face was unmistakable as Voldemort leaned over the table, closer and closer.

"It should tell you that even the most menial of details I will notice, and I can find, and I will not forget," Voldemort whispered, his eyes never leaving Cuffe's. "What you eat for breakfast, how you go to work, what side of the desk you keep your quills, I have the capacity to discover, to know all of these things. This should demonstrate to you one truth: that you cannot hide from me, and that you would be wise not to attempt it."

Cuffe was hyperventilating now, and Voldemort found it interesting how the man's eyes bulged ever so slightly when the Dark Lord seized the man's arm like a striking snake.

"You do not use your right hand, but the muscles show no atrophy. I wonder what –"

"Please, no, please – AHH!"

Cuffe began howling with pain as Voldemort drew his wand, probing the hand with interest. It seemed like something was crunching beneath his wand... interesting indeed.

He slowly made an incision that he doubted Cuffe even noticed in the pain, and with a few muttered words, drew his wand back. A long, translucent strand, covered in sticky gore, erupted from the incision. Voldemort's smile returned – a very intriguing bit of magic, but one he was familiar with – he had created it.

"Reparo," he whispered, and a second later, the liquid-like strand had reformed into an ink bottle, covered in blood, but intact. Not a single shard was missing.

Cuffe had stopped screaming now, but was staring, wide-eyed and panting, at the bottle sitting on the table.

"Who put that in your hand?" Voldemort asked conversationally.

"Kemester," Cuffe blurted. "D-Dmitri Kemester. Hit Wizard."

"Of course," Voldemort said with a nod, another piece of the puzzle clicking into place. "You told him everything you knew, didn't you – and he was going to warn Fudge, disrupt the press conference?"

"Yes, yes!" Cuffe gasped. "But something went wrong – he didn't get to Fudge, Umbridge caught up with him –"

"And sent him to the one place he could be controlled and conveniently forgotten about," Voldemort finished, turning to look towards the north. "Azkaban. The son has joined the father."

"Wh-what?" Cuffe stammered, looking down at his hand and carefully poking at it with his fork, with the motions of a man who didn't quite believe what had just happened and was trying to confirm it however he could.

"It complicates matters, but it's otherwise irrelevant," Voldemort said smoothly, turning around and stepping away from the table. "Who else coerced you while you were at the Ministry?"

"Two lawyers," Cuffe breathed, nearly choking on his words. "Nymphadora Vuneren and Clarissa Desdame."

Voldemort paused. "Foolish half-blood," he whispered, immediately seeing through the comically thin fake name. "It would fool most, but not Lord Voldemort. But Desdame... where did Miss Nymphadora Tonks dredge up her? Intriguing indeed..."

"My hand..."

"It should work as before," Voldemort said calmly, his mind carefully returning to the matter at hand, walking back to the railing and bringing Cuffe's astonished face back into view with his mirror. He would not forget the name 'Desdame', though. "However, such a reward I have given you is not without a price."

"I – I'd do anything, my Lord –" Cuffe stammered gratefully as he stared at Voldemort's silhouette, outlined against the bloody sky.

Voldemort's lipless mouth curled into a triumphant smile – that was all he needed to hear.

"I'm going to be closing up soon."

Tonks waved her hand vaguely and set her drink back on the bar. "Yeah, good plan."

"That means," Aberforth said sternly, rapping his knuckles on the bar, "that you have to leave, Miss Tonks. While I am gracious, I'm not superhuman – I need my sleep. And it's seven in the morning – shouldn't you be going into the office?"

"I'll – look, Aberforth, I've got everything under control here," Tonks replied irritably, rubbing her eyes despite herself. "I sent an owl to Kingsley – I'm taking the day off. Merlin knows I need it."

Aberforth rolled his eyes. "I still need to close up the cabinets –"

"I can handle it."

"You pay for any drinks you take while I'm gone," Aberforth warned, his eyes narrowing. "But in the mean time, I'm going to bed – should have closed up hours ago..."

Tonks grinned. Aberforth didn't like turning down customers, and even though they hadn't talked all night, Aberforth had still remained awake, scrubbing down glasses and rinsing out suspicious-looking flasks.

"Mind checking on Sirius for me?"

"Don't waste your time, Aberforth, I'm here already," Sirius grumbled, staggering down the stairs, his arms filled with books and papers. "And I'll keep an eye on your booze."

Aberforth snorted. "Yeah, and I'm a dragon's hind end. You think I trust you within a mile of my liquor, Black?"

"Sure, why not?" Sirius replied cheerfully, sitting next to Tonks at the bar and dumping his books on the old wood. "Get some sleep, Aberforth – you're getting old."

Aberforth glared at Sirius, but said nothing as he trudged up the stairs, slamming the door behind him at the top, leaving Tonks and Sirius alone in the bar.

"You've been up all night."

"So have you, by the looks of things," Tonks remarked, as Sirius reached behind the bar and pulled free a bottle of Firewhiskey. "You shouldn't have been, with your injuries –"

"I'm fine," Sirius snapped, breaking the seal on the Firewhiskey and pouring a generous amount in one of Aberforth's newly cleaned glasses. "After everything I've heard, it's not like I could sleep anyways. What are you drinking?"

"Goblin rye, nothing too special," Tonks replied, pouring the rest of the bottle into her glass and taking a swig, wincing at the harsh bitterness.

"Never knew you to drink hard liquor."

"Never knew you to stay up all night working on what looks like Arithmancy," Tonks retorted, taking another swig. "Besides, it's a bit of a rite of passage with Aurors and Hit Wizards – eventually, you get a taste for it."

"Not me," Sirius replied with a shudder as he took a swig from his glass. "Hated that stuff..."

"What did you find out?"

Sirius sighed and ran a hand through his long, unkempt hair. "You know I haven't done this sort of thing since Hogwarts, right? And that was almost twenty years ago?"

"You were practically a Transfiguration prodigy," Tonks replied with a snort, "so don't tell me you didn't manage through it."

"Some of it, yeah, but Tonks, this is magical theory that's beyond me," Sirius replied seriously, setting his glass down as he pulled a few papers free of the untidy pile. "Simulamancy may have a massive Transfiguration component, but I was never good at Potions – which happen to be a major component of this mess – and some of this magic goes beyond even the craziest Arithmancy calculations that I've ever seen. Factor in the spell I cast... Tonks, this is a problem for someone like Dumbledore to solve, not me."

Tonks let her hair go emerald green as she glared at Sirius. "You're telling me that Sirius Black, who if I remember correctly scored 'Outstanding' on the N.E.W.T. level in Transfiguration, Arithmancy, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms –"

"I'm not a genius, Tonks."

"Yeah, but I'm sure you could get through this junk a hell of a lot better than I could," Tonks returned angrily. "Look, how bad is the Arithmancy – I can see the calculations from here, they don't look that bad –"

"Well, sure, maybe not those ones," Sirius replied with a snort, yanking another heap of papers free as he drew his wand. "But as every other person who studies this garbage at high levels knows, the more complex the spell –"

"Don't tell me you ascribe to the belief that every spell has an 'equation' that can be solved," Tonks said dangerously, "because even the Unspeakables don't buy that."

Sirius took another swig from his glass and when he looked at Tonks, his expression was more annoyed than angry. "You took Arithmancy at Hogwarts, right? You know that it's the study of how magic is tied to numbers and geometry and all that?"

"Yeah," Tonks said slowly, "and if I remember correctly, there's a bunch of conditions that Arithmancy 'dictates', so to speak, regarding

how powerful some types of magic can be. Like the number seven being the most powerful magical number."

"Right," Sirius replied, downing the rest of his glass and quickly refilling it. "Well, what the Hogwarts curriculum doesn't like telling Arithmancy students is that for the past five hundred years, there have been a large number of magical theorists who have been trying to find the 'equations of magic', just like those Muggle 'Laws of Physics'. It's controversial at best among magical theoreticians and downright heresy among most purebloods, so Hogwarts prefers to keep it quiet, but it's still a legitimate approach to Arithmancy. Problem is, there are far too many variables to consider when you're doing these calculations, and there are practically no observable trends beyond the basic ones they teach in Arithmancy, at least not for typical spells."

"Okay," Tonks said warily, already knowing that the conversation was going to get worse. "But what do you mean by 'typical spells'?"

"Instantaneous spells," Sirius clarified. "Ones cast with wands. Those are more of a matter of skill and emotion – they really can't be quantified. However, in isolated cases, there have been people who don't give a damn that there are no recognizable trends – they just try to stick with the basics they know and extrapolate like mad from there. Extrapolate badly, and you end up like any dozen of the wizard horror stories that old Flitwick and McGonagall like to tell when they tell people off for mispronouncing spells. However, if you go in the right direction..."

Tonks understood, and the thought gave her chills. "You're talking about witches and wizards who invent their own spells. Like Snape, and Dumbledore, and –"

"Voldemort," Sirius finished darkly. "Scary as hell, I know – I lived through the First War, and I saw some of the nasty spells he cooked up, and it doesn't help that Dumbledore's dropped off the face of the earth. Either way, you go in the right direction with these sorts of... 'calculations', for lack of a better word, you get some pretty impressive results. But it's painstaking, it takes a lot of experimentation, and it's hard as hell to get right."

"So those that get it right –"

"I don't know if they have something we don't, but either way, it scares the hell out of me," Sirius finished grimly, downing the rest of his drink.

Tonks' felt her hair grow another few inches and darken to a deep teal. "But this doesn't really seem to make a lot of sense – I mean, there were instructions in those books about the charms I needed to cast, and magical 'calculations' I needed to make –"

"Keep in mind that Dumbledore wrote one of these books, and that on the scale of what we're talking about, all those charms are a bit derivative," Sirius said, wincing at Tonks' indignant glare. "The man who thought up the combinations of all these spells was a fucking genius, but you were just following procedures and you made a couple of really lucky guesses. In all due honesty, both you and Harry are lucky the ritual didn't blow up in your face the first time you did it."

"Love that you have such a high opinion of me," Tonks said dryly, refilling her glass.

Sirius smirked. "In any case, from the books and the notes you gave me – and this is some really screwed up shit, I might add – I parsed together some Arithmancy and..."

He rose to his feet and tapped his wand on the paper in his hand, and before Tonks' astounded eyes, a snarled mass of glowing numbers, letters, and symbols, all written in Sirius' handwriting, leapt off the page to hang suspended in the air with multiple dimensions.

Tonks whistled. "Yikes."

"You see what I mean?" Sirius said, shaking his head wearily as he walked around the glowing mass. "From what I can tell, this is what the simulamancy ritual's 'equation' should have looked like, and I haven't even solved for a tenth of the 'coefficients' in this nightmare."

It's ugly as fuck, but now it only gets worse. That shielding spell you cast – it changes the time parameter of this mess, and I don't even know where to factor it in! To say nothing of solving this snarled nightmare..."

"I get it, I get it," Tonks said, as Sirius Vanished the glowing symbols with a wave of his wand. "Frankly, I'm amazed you got that far."

"I only did because you gave me a time parameter," Sirius said tiredly, sitting back down and refilling his glass. "That's the great thing about this sort of ritualized magic – it's pretty damned primitive compared to spells cast out of a wand, but it takes time – it's not instantaneous. Spells cast out a wand that are instantaneous apparently need to be 'continuous' under some sort of 'time derivative' and already I'm getting into terminology that I barely understand." He took a heavy swig from his glass. "And right now, I don't know how to fix it."

Tonks blew out a heavy breath. "Well, at least you tried. Do you..."

"Do I what?"

"Do you think it's safe to try simulamancy again?"

Sirius laughed, but it was the bitter laugh of somebody who was beyond helpless. "Tonks, if I knew, I would tell you, and as much as I love the slap-dash approach here, you're gambling with high stakes – namely, Harry's mind, and likely yours. And right now, you've both been through too much."

"So have you," Tonks pointed out.

Sirius stiffened, and looked down into his glass, his eyes haunted and filled with grief. "I... I really thought... goddamn it, I really thought..."

"Sirius, I didn't know about Lupin until he told me –"

"He's stronger than that," Sirius whispered, slamming his hand on the bar. "Fuck it, he's stronger than that! If he knew that Harry was with those god-awful Muggles, he should have done something, he promised James... he promised me –"

"He's blaming the lycanthropy –" Tonks began softly.

"No, fuck that!" Sirius exclaimed, his eyes suddenly dilating with rage. "He's better than that, he's stronger than that, he never would have used that as an excuse! Where was his fucking pride? I knew him, Tonks! I knew him as well as he fucking knows himself! He would never have used the fact that he's a werewolf as an excuse – James and I never let him –"

"But neither of you were there," Tonks said quietly, looking at her own drink now. "He was alone –"

"Don't you dare blame this on me or James!" Sirius snarled. "There was nothing I could have done, I was thrown into Azkaban without a fucking trial! If he knew that Harry was being mistreated like that – fuck, he promised me –"

"I know, Sirius!" Tonks said forcefully, putting her hands on Sirius' quaking shoulders and trying to meet his eyes. "But he was alone – and it's hard to have that kind of strength when you have no one else!"

"I have it," Sirius spat savagely.

"Yeah, but you're one a fucking kind," Tonks said, shaking her head as she let go of Sirius and turned back to her drink. "That's why we can't give up on Harry – not now. We can't let him think that he's alone in this – people do stupid shit when they're on their own, and they lose hope. And I – I mean, we can't let that happen."

Sirius looked at Tonks for a long few seconds, his eyes strangely filled with a bit of confusion. "Tonks..."

"I'm handling it," she interrupted viciously, draining her glass with a single gulp that caused her to cough and sputter, the harsh alcohol burning the back of her throat.

"I didn't expect there to be... well, something between you and Harry –"

"I didn't either," Tonks replied curtly, refilling her glass, trying desperately to ignore the sea of roiling emotions filling her mind, and the images of her wrapped around him, images that felt so right and so wrong, so natural and so unnatural at the same time...

"Tonks, I'm Harry's godfather," Sirius began slowly, with concern. "If there's something between you two, I'm okay with it, but I'd like to know –"

"There is something," Tonks interrupted, her hair suddenly going matte black, "but I don't understand it."

"Then talk to me, for fuck's sake," Sirius urged. "I'm good at this 'relationship' stuff."

Tonks snorted. "We both know that's a royal load of bullshit."

"Well, I try," Sirius said fairly. "So what's up?"

Tonks took a deep breath as she tried to bring her thoughts together, trying to parse together how she felt about Harry, trying to dredge something up that made an iota of sense...

"We're comrades, and friends, and I feel really happy with him," she whispered, pink tinges returning to her hair as she turned towards the window, where the rising sun was finally peaking in. "I think we bring out the best in each other. Even when things are terrible... well, there's something there, and I want to share that with him."

"That... that sounds awesome, Tonks," Sirius said, patting her on the back. "You're a lucky girl – so what's the problem, then?"

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

"I wish I knew," Tonks whispered as her hair returned to bright pink. "Merlin, Sirius, I wish I knew."

He arrived at Cassane Manor just as the rain began to fall. The gate was already open.

"Son of a bitch," Harry muttered, running his hand through his simulacrum's long blonde hair before quickly throwing his hood up and pulling his cloak tighter around himself. "Just what I need right now..."

He discarded the broken Butterbeer bottle that Tonks had turned into a Portkey and hurried towards the door across the slick cobblestones, all the while wondering why the gate had been left open.

"He couldn't have been expecting me," he whispered to himself, as he rounded one of the trees. "And unless... oh god."

He could hardly believe his eyes, and he had to blink a few times before he fully comprehended what he saw.

Two Muggle police cars were parked in front of the house.

He increased his pace, cutting between the cars towards the front door, his stomach churning with a growing feeling of anxiety –

The door opened the second his hand touched the knocker.

"Ah, Miss Desdame, I'm glad you're here," Nathan Cassane said with a small smile. "Please, come in."

"I'm not catching you at a bad time?" Harry said warily, stepping inside, pulling back her hood and noticing for the first time three men in long overcoats standing in the foyer. All of them were eyeing her with marked distrust.

"Not at all, not at all, they're just leaving," Cassane said with a nod towards the men. "Officers Finnigan and Riley have everything they need, and if Inspector Norton feels that INTERPOL needs to get involved –"

He threw a sharp glare at the tallest and most primly dressed of the men, who returned the glare in full.

"I'm sorry," Harry said curiously, "but Mr. Finnigan?"

"Aye," the shortest, oldest, and roughest-looking of the men said curtly. "Pat Finnigan, Special Police Force, and that's all you need to know, Miss..."

"Clarissa Desdame," Harry replied, immediately assuming a haughty demeanour and inwardly cursing his curiosity – of course it was Seamus' father, the resemblance was unmistakable! "Barrister."

"You called an lawyer, Cassane?" Norton exclaimed angrily. "You sure aren't behaving like someone who has nothing to hide –"

"Until you have a subpoena, you aren't getting near my property," Cassane growled, his eyes blazing as he pushed the door wider. "Now I must respectfully ask you to leave, and if you have any more questions, you can speak to my legal team – I gave you all of their contact information."

"Oh trust me," Finnigan growled as he strode out the door, "we will."

The other two officers gave Cassane deeply mistrustful looks before following Finnigan, and Cassane couldn't slam the door fast enough behind them.

"Just when I wished my life was a bit less complicated," he murmured, wiping his forehead. "I'm sorry you had to see that, Miss Desdame –"

"Oh, drop the act, Cassane, neither of us has time for it," Harry retorted angrily, pulling off her cloak in one swift motion.

Cassane cocked an eyebrow as he took Harry's cloak. "Excuse me?"

Harry took a deep breath – time to test his suspicions. "You know this is just a simulacrum – you know I'm Harry Potter."

Cassane paused for a few seconds, before giving a slight smile. "Well, I know now."

Harry's mouth fell open. "But you told Tonks –"

"I made assumptions, Harry," Cassane replied as he moved towards the drawing room, Harry following right behind him. Strangely, the second they entered the room, the sound of pounding rain on the rooftop seemed to disappear, replaced by a strange whooshing noise as several brass instruments whirled through the air with a slight wave of Cassane's wand. "Fortunately, since I have been forced to choose a side, your revelation to me is not suspect. I keep my secrets."

"But how did you figure it out?" Harry demanded anxiously. "If you figured it out –"

"Ah, but I used the clues I was given, and the fact that you weren't very, ah, good at being a woman the first time you entered my house," Cassane replied slyly, sending the brass instruments into a tornado of motion as he turned and leaned against the table. "You've improved significantly, I might add, and I must congratulate both you and Miss Tonks for the ambition of your scheme – most would have been content with Polyjuice Potion, but you went the extra mile. I'm more than a little impressed."

"Uh, thanks, I think," Harry said, frowning as he watched Cassane scan a massive parchment filled to the edges with scribbling on his desk. "Really, Tonks did all the work –"

"If your consciousness hadn't been malleable enough to leap across the band of magic into your simulacrum's body, Harry, you would be worse than dead," Cassane interrupted, shrugging as he continued to scan his parchment. "Not to mention that you and Miss Tonks are the first magic-users to successfully perform simulamancy in centuries, and that the Department of Mysteries would pay dearly to get their hands on you now if they knew."

"Then why did the Ministry place the books at Hogwarts in the first place?" Harry asked, bewildered. "There's some dangerous magic in those books –"

Cassane rolled his eyes. "Harry, we're talking about wizards in the sixteenth century, a time when Metamorphmagi were considered less than human and exceptionally dangerous, and while the

Unspeakables may have examined those books, they are, and remain to this day, extraordinarily paranoid, even of their brethren. They examined the books, cited 'extraordinary limitations,' and sent everything to Hogwarts under the belief that the Headmaster would protect it. Eventually, simulamancy was forgotten – a far better defence than any spell or curse."

"Then how do you know about it?" Harry asked sharply.

"I've done a lot of research, Harry," Cassane said distractedly, "and there's another copy of The Book of Inversion and Duplex sitting in my library as we speak. Don't ask where I got it – while I've spent the last decade searching for beautiful things, I did not find any there." He shuddered, and returned to his paper, leaving Harry to try and process the information that Cassane had just given him. Finally, he decided to change subjects.

"What were the Muggle police doing here?"

Cassane paused for a few seconds, and slowly ran a hand through his silver hair. "It's a bit of a... bit of an awkward situation, Harry; I'd prefer not to discuss it."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Not... exactly, per se, but just the same, I'd rather not talk about it," Cassane said uncomfortably.

Harry was perplexed – Nathan Cassane, a wizard who usually had such aplomb, seemed visibly disconcerted about a few innocent questions – what was going on?

"I'm concerned that –"

"Harry, please," Cassane said quietly. "It's not relevant."

"I'm concerned that you might be in danger," Harry continued, placing both hands on the table and fixing Cassane with a steely glare. "That newspaper article –"

"It does exactly what you and I both want," Cassane finished smoothly, dipping his quill in some ink and scribbling a few notes on the very edge of the paper. "Stalling the Ministry, giving us time, and hopefully making Fudge and Voldemort's lives a little more complicated. It places me in a bit of danger, but I'm fairly confident I can handle it – Voldemort won't dare show his face now, and because of my statements, I'm in a position to call in all manner of... 'reinforcements', so to speak." Cassane gave Harry a tightly confident smile. "The second you become a man exposing truth, it becomes a dangerous game indeed to attack you."

"Maybe for you," Harry muttered darkly. "But that doesn't change the fact that you and I ran the last time the Death Eaters attacked –"

"Because I hadn't taken a side at that point," Cassane said, his voice abruptly chill. "But this forced my hand."

He pulled a folded piece of parchment from his jacket and passed it to Harry, who read it, and then reread it before crumpling it into a tight ball in his fist. What the hell was she thinking, trying to interfere in this... compromise everything –

"As you can see," Cassane said calmly, his voice filled with an edge, "if that message had been intercepted, I would have been placed in an uncomfortable situation. So I chose to take a side in this, and it's a good thing I did – otherwise, you and Tonks wouldn't have gotten out of the Ministry alive. Scrimgeour's been asking questions."

"But why would he have any reason to suspect you?" Harry asked with bewilderment.

Cassane let out a long breath before setting his quill down and staring at the calculations. "Rufus Scrimgeour and I... well, we have a history." He straightened slightly and walked around the table, scanning the paper from a different angle. "Hmm... interesting."

"The writing is upside-down," Harry said helpfully.

"I'm looking at things from a different angle, Harry, which becomes essential in these problems," Cassane said with a hint of a grin. "Particularly with as many variables as we have in this case..."

"What is it?" Harry asked curiously, moving next to Cassane.

"A rough approximation of the enchantments I know to surround Hogwarts, courtesy of some old paperwork Dumbledore provided for me in the First War," Cassane replied smoothly, drawing his wand and tapping it twice on the paper. Before Harry's astonished eyes, the entire mass of ink lit up and rose off the paper, forming a massive three-dimensional diagram of Hogwarts itself. It was like the Marauder's Map, but a much more detailed scale. Lines of every colour swirled and shifted around the diagram as Cassane prodded it with his wand. "We were trying to defend the school, and we needed to identify the areas where reinforcement was required."

"Is this... current?" Harry asked, mystified as Cassane slowly rotated the diagram with a wave of his wand. "I mean, could I use this to –"

"Find and stop the spiritual attacks?" Cassane finished, weariness moving onto his face. "No. This was only the Hogwarts Dumbledore knew – and even he does not know the location of the lock that was broken, letting those spirits free."

"Does... does this mean you're going to try and help us?" Harry asked, sudden hope welling up inside of him. "I mean, if you're on our side now –"

"And you know, given my position, I cannot do anything overtly," Cassane interrupted tiredly, "but I might be able to help you understand the magic compelling the spirits – and with that, we might be able to trace their location."

Harry heard every note of hesitancy in Cassane's voice, and he frowned. "Then what's the problem –"

"Harry, keep in mind that even the Headmasters of Hogwarts don't know every secret of that castle. The sort of projection that I have created here is only a fraction of the true magic vested in the school,

and even the best of wizards couldn't tell you everything about it." Cassane sighed as he waved his wand, sending the diagram back onto the paper. "And I'm sorry, Harry, but I cannot easily forget what memories I have left of the last time I took a side in this war."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, but all of a sudden, he remembered the flames inside the Ministry, the screaming, the single one-armed figure falling through the smoke –

"I understand," he murmured. "And I'm sorry."

"While I appreciate your feelings, you don't understand," Cassane said quietly, his eyes fixed on the paper. "To lose those closest to you, knowing that they died cursing your name for failing them, knowing that you could have saved them, and then the hell you charge into when you realize the darkness was on either path..."

His voice trailed off, and Harry swallowed hard, not knowing what to say, feeling more and more uncomfortable with each second of silence...

"Does..."

"Does what?" Cassane asked.

"Sorry, does that map of yours specify all the enchantments on Hogwarts right now?" Harry asked quickly.

"It doesn't automatically update, if that's what you're referring to," Cassane replied, turning to Harry. "Why?"

"So it doesn't include the time distortion?"

Cassane abruptly stiffened, his eyes flashing. "What?"

Harry swallowed hard again – Cassane's expression wasn't angry, but the sheer intensity of the stare unnerved Harry, much like Dumbledore's 'X-ray' stare once had. "Th-the time distortion – it's getting worse –"

"What direction?"

"Huh?"

"What direction, Harry!" Cassane exclaimed, grabbing Harry by the shoulders. "Faster or slower inside Hogwarts?"

"Slower, slower!" Harry replied hastily.

"And you performed your first simulamancy ritual inside the school?" Cassane continued, his eyes blazing with sudden elation.

"What does that –"

"Yes or no, Harry, we could have something here!"

"Yes, yes!" Harry said quickly, breathing fast as Cassane released Harry's shoulders only to yank the image of Hogwarts into the air again with a frenzied slash of his wand. "What do you think –"

"Time distortion allows us a tracking measure," Cassane breathed quickly, sketching flaming characters into the air with his wand faster than Harry could write. The brass instruments around the room leapt into full action, surrounding the characters and twisting them into shapes that Cassane shot onto the image with a jab of his wand. "The more the magic is activated, the more the time slows along the defined curve – but the distortion has a curve of its own, and one must take into account any discontinuities –"

"Mr. Cassane, what are you –"

Cassane's smile had fully blossomed now, and the image of Hogwarts seemed to get brighter to mirror it. "We have patterns, Harry – and you gave me a piece of what we needed. The key was simulamancy – Nimue fuck us both, we're lucky men!"

"I'm sorry, you're losing me," Harry said, putting a hand to his forehead.

"Simulamancy, Harry!" Cassane said, his face filled with a mad elation that Harry found strangely thrilling. "Magic's built on patterns, Harry – it's the only way magic of this scope could have worked, and Voldemort knows it too! It would have taken a phenomenal amount of will and power to compel those ghosts, and thanks to your simulamancy, we have a way of tracking and seeing it!" The older man was panting now, his sheer excitement animating his every motion, and Harry couldn't but feel a little excited as well – it was like watching genius unfold, a sudden revelation. "Every time a ghost is unleashed, the temporal distortion gets stronger."

"But why would simulamancy –"

"Because both types of magic – at least symbolically – break the rules of time, which are powerful restraints upon any type of magic," Cassane whispered, waving his wand and causing the image of Hogwarts to reappear again, rotating slowly and gleaming brighter than before. "Reversing death in two different forms – one by body, one by soul. Both require exorbitant amounts of energy, but they cannot occupy the same temporal space..."

Cassane's voice trailed off, and a second later, he snatched up Hermione's crumpled letter, unfolded it and scanned it quickly. "It's not ingenious, but it is a pattern," he whispered, crumpling the paper. "And if we are to believe it, it confirms my hypothesis regarding time, or at least supports it."

"You're talking about Hermione's theory that this simulamancy ritual is following some sort of life progression?" Harry asked incredulously. "Are you serious?"

"A valid theory in the absence of any others," Cassane murmured. "But her argument, while technically sound, is flawed – her hypothesis that something before conception is intriguing, but lacking in that she thinks it is some metaphorical state. In reality, we both know it's something far more circular."

Harry's mind raced as he tried to follow Cassane's logic: reversing death in two different forms...

"Death," he blurted, his eyes wide with sudden realization. "Death before life."

"The great circular nature of it all that men have tried to circumvent for centuries," Cassane said darkly, "and even I cannot claim a lack of temptation..."

"But what would symbolize death at Hogwarts?" Harry asked bewildered, moving closing and scanning the image. "Not even the Chamber of Secrets –"

"That, Harry, becomes the question," Cassane interrupted, giving Harry a small smile. "You're thinking, and I like that. The only massive problem is that there are no tombs in Hogwarts – there never have been, not even of Headmasters. Figuring that with the vast number of irreverent students in this school, it has always been assumed that a tomb would become too great a target."

"That – that's great, then!" Harry exclaimed. "A tomb in Hogwarts – we just have to find it and stop the reversal from there! I found the Chamber of Secrets, it can't be –"

"In the mean time, however," Cassane interrupted, his face abruptly serious again, "if we proceed by all our theories, Hogwarts is in grave danger."

"What? But I thought you said –"

"The natural cycle of life, Harry, only has so many stages," Cassane said grimly as he raised his wand. "Birth, and childhood – two stages gone already." He tapped the image of Hogwarts at Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Tower respectively. "If we follow our theory, what will happen when the final stage is reached?"

Harry froze, and all of his wild hopes hit a screeching halt as he stared at the image of Hogwarts, and Cassane's curiously flat eyes behind it. "I... I dunno." He was suddenly acutely aware of the pounding of the rain on the rooftop, a sound he had ignored for the past few minutes – it was no longer excitedly muted.

"Time slows down with each stage, Harry," Cassane whispered. "So what will happen when we reach Death again?"

"I... I..."

"Nothing more than the nightmare that undoubtedly Voldemort fears beyond all telling," Cassane said quietly. "A time stop – the ultimate singularity. Hogwarts will become lost in time – and everything with it, and the greatest storehouse of ancient magic on this island will be gone forever." Cassane dissolved the image with a wave of his wand and fixed Harry with a cold stare. "And this is not something I believe Voldemort desires."

Harry swallowed hard. "But... but what can we do?"

"We have to meddle with the system, disrupt the cycle, and the best way to do it is to get the ghosts out of Hogwarts entirely," Cassane said, turning on his heel and walking straight out of the room, Harry hurrying behind him. "Suck them out, get them contained until we can find the tomb. The damn things contribute more to this mess than anything else, and we need them out. When the attacks come, we don't destroy the souls like Dumbledore did, but contain them, bring their images into a place where we can take control, so whatever energy composes them can't be fed back into the perverse cycle that compels their actions."

"I'm sorry, what?" Harry asked blankly.

Cassane sighed exasperatedly. "Harry, I need you to concentrate here as I'm going to ask you a very strange question, and I need an honest answer: from entering the Great Hall, what is the order of the tables?"

"What does that –"

"It's a pattern, Harry, and one of enormous importance here!" Cassane snarled. "The order is still Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin, correct?"

"Y-yes... wait a minute!"

"Ravenclaw girls first, followed by Gryffindor boys," Cassane said smoothly as they arrived in the sitting room. All of the trinkets, Harry noted, had been restored to their proper places on the old wooden shelves. "Voldemort needed every pattern he could exploit here to power this magic – the next target will be a Slytherin girl I'm suspecting, and woe betide us if it's not."

"Because if the pattern's broken –"

"The magic will destabilise," Cassane finished grimly, settling down in his armchair near the fire and fixing Harry with a steely gaze. "The temporal distortion will accelerate, and the damage to our target's sanity will be immeasurable."

Harry paused, and tried to collect his thoughts. It all made sense – and frankly, he was surprised at all the patterns that Cassane had pointed out. The man's bloody good, I can give him that... makes me wonder how long he was working on this problem before I arrived...

He took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly as he sat down opposite the older wizard. "So what do we do now?"

Cassane put a finger to his lips, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Dumbledore still has an agent in the Department of Mysteries, correct?"

"Yeah, Broderick Bode, I think," Harry replied quickly. "I was actually planning on seeing him so he could help –"

"I'll take care of it," Cassane said with a nod, his finger still on his lips. "Fortunately for the both of us, the method of extracting ghosts from a dwelling, even one as filled with magic as Hogwarts, is a tried and tested practice with the right materials. I bet that Dumbledore likely already contacted Bode to get everything ready before he disappeared – our job is probably half done. Some equipment will need to be installed at Hogwarts, but I don't think that will be an issue. The real problem," he continued, leaning forward and folding his hands, "will be finding the tomb in Hogwarts. Fortunately, the same method that gave us our clue might help us solve the riddle."

Harry's eyes widened. "You've got to be kidding me. Simulamancy?"

"You see images – strange images, almost of the future – every time you use that magic, don't you?" Cassane asked, not meeting Harry's eyes.

Harry was lost for words – how in all of the bloody hells did he know that? "I... I don't know how... you know what, after this meeting, I can't even begin to guess how you figured that out –"

"It's common, actually," Cassane said with a smile. "You're meddling with time, Harry, with that ritual – so you see hypothetical visions of the future, partially defined yet unclear. The point is that with the right augmentation to the simulamancy ritual – which, if I receive enough notes from you, I can potentially implement – we could get a glimpse into where the tomb lies."

"Really?"

"It's worth a shot, and it would save us some time, at least," Cassane replied easily, "and you get a third simulacrum."

"Something went wrong last time, though," Harry blurted, trying to meet Cassane's eyes. "Sirius attacked us..."

And he proceeded to explain Sirius' situation, everything from his innocence to the possession. By the time Harry was finished fifteen minutes later, Cassane had risen to his feet, poured himself a small glass of whiskey, and was staring to the flames.

"Incredible," he whispered.

"Sorry?" Harry asked. "I thought we were talking about the possibility of the simulamancy going wrong again!"

"No, it appears I underestimated the sheer guts of Peter Pettigrew," Cassane mused. "The man has more cunning and nerve than I ever gave him credit for... regardless of that, this at least explains how our suspect managed to get his possession mechanism working."

"But wouldn't it require energy for the ghost to possess Sirius over such a distance?" Harry argued. "A huge amount of it?"

"Not as much as we'd think," Cassane replied, raising a finger as he turned away from the fire, a small grin on his face. "He wouldn't have to worry about the necessary patterns required to work within Hogwarts, and if the ghost was mentally strong enough, it could have easily been the displacement from equilibrium that our suspect needed to break the barriers required to operate in Hogwarts."

"I... I guess," Harry admitted, running a hand through his hair. "I just thought –"

"Aha!" Cassane exclaimed, his eyes bright with pride. "You're thinking – I like that!"

"I'm also realizing that I don't have the money for simulamancy this time," Harry replied.

Cassane's face fell slightly as he sat back down. "Well, you know I can't just transfer it to you, Harry. It's not that I don't trust you, and it's not that we couldn't do a very good job making it untraceable –"

"So you'll give me the money –"

"Harry, the amount of scrutiny I am under is immense, and I am quite certain that the majority of my overseas private accounts have been noticed," Cassane said seriously, "and the last thing I need is questions from Rufus Scrimgeour. Besides, if I remember correctly, the gold invested in this ritual – it is symbolically important it comes from you."

"But Tonks partially paid for the simulamancy last time!" Harry protested.

"And it might have been one of the reasons it went wrong," Cassane retorted. "But that doesn't matter – I suspect you already knew I wasn't about to give you the money, so what is it?"

Harry took a very deep breath, praying with every second that this would work, that he would finally get some answers. "You... you told me, before we went into the Ministry, that you knew my father."

Cassane's face went abruptly blank before he sighed heavily. "I did, and your mother as well. You cannot begin to believe how much you are like James and Lily, Harry."

"Right," Harry said uncomfortably. "Anyways, according to everything I found out, the Potter Vaults – any sort of family money I might have – were closed by a judge named Claudius Kemester after my parents died... and I wanted to know if you knew why."

Cassane closed his eyes, and a look of tremendous agony crossed over his face, as if he was remembering great pain.

"Harry," he said very quietly, "I'd like for you to go to the far shelf, closest to the window, and take down the framed photograph at the very top. Please?"

What the... Harry rose to his feet and standing on his toes, pulled down the small, silver-framed photograph. In a way, it almost reminded Harry of the picture Sirius and Moody had shown him of the Order of the Phoenix... but it was different.

"Come here, Harry."

"I... I see you in this picture," Harry whispered, not looking up from the image as he handed it to Cassane, who took it in his slightly shaking hands. "And I see my mum... and my dad... hey, is that Sirius and Lupin?"

"Yes," Cassane said quietly. "Next to Lupin is Dorcas Meadowes – which, as I'm sure you have not been informed, was Dumbledore's first spy within the Death Eaters."

"What?"

"Yes, that, among other things, were the reasons that Lord Voldemort killed her personally," Cassane said quietly. "She never saw eye-to-

eye with Dumbledore, joined my little group out of protest... but that's hardly important. Look, there's an interesting face you won't see in many respectable pictures: Antonin Dolohov."

Harry's brow furrowed as he regarded the handsome man with the twisted smile. "Seems quite the character... why does that name sound familiar –"

"It should, he's a Death Eater."

Harry's eyes widened with shock. "Then what's he doing in your –"

"He wasn't a Death Eater when they took this, no," Cassane said, a trace of deep sadness in his voice. "The woman next to him – that was his wife, Regina. She died in an accident that involved the Ministry, though it's always been suspected Voldemort was behind it. Blinded and maddened by grief, not to mention blamed for his wife's death, Dolohov joined Voldemort's order with open arms." Cassane shook his head bitterly and ran a hand through his silver hair. "We lost a good wizard that day."

"Who... who are the rest of these people?"

"That's Galahad and Isabelle Vuneren," Cassane said, swallowing hard as he pointed at a blonde couple near the back of the photo. "Voldemort destroyed the entire family with the willing aide of the Malfoys – they've wanted that family gone for years. That's Warren Helms – extraordinarily powerful wizard, taught Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts for a year before he died saving the Muggle Prime Minister's life from a Killing Curse, though the man never knew it. That's Barronfellow Pomfrey – we all called him Buck, he was our Healer until the Lestranges ripped him in half vertically during an ambush outside of Westminster... and that's Carson Thomas –"

"Wait a second," Harry said, taking the picture from Cassane's hand and looking closer. "I know that face – that, that's Dean's dad! He always said his dad left, and that he wasn't sure if he was a Muggle or not –"

"He was a wizard, and he was a damned good one," Cassane whispered, pulling the photograph slowly from Harry's hand. For a second, Harry thought he saw Cassane's eyes moisten slightly before hastily wiping them dry. "He – he wanted to protect the family, he said he'd come back... but he couldn't. I... I remember when he made the decision to leave... hell, I was there..."

"Mr. Cassane... Nathan?" Harry asked slowly, looking down at the picture and trying desperately to avoid looking at Cassane, fearing that it would make the lump in his throat get even bigger. "Who is that woman standing next to you?"

Cassane closed both his eyes and sighed with a heavy finality that was filled with unresolved, deep grief. "That, Harry Potter, was my wife, Cassandra Cassane."

He was wrong – he didn't need to look at Cassane for the lump in his throat to get worse. "W-what did you do?"

Cassane gave Harry the photograph and rose slowly to his feet, turning to stare into the fire. "Harry, we were a special team, under the direct jurisdiction of the Minister herself. We had special orders, special directives, and very special jobs. I was the leader and the recruiter of the entire team, and despite whatever some might tell you, we were a legitimate part of the Ministry."

"But what did you do?" Harry asked curiously. "My father worked for you?"

"So did your mother and Sirius, until we were disbanded, in February of 1980," Cassane said, his voice uneven. "As for what we did... well, from what I can remember, we were a plain-clothes group, used for gathering intelligence, procuring information, and tracking down and eliminating servants of Lord Voldemort. A... detective group, if you will."

"A detective group," Harry repeated incredulously. "The Ministry wouldn't have shut down the Potter Vaults because of that... wait, you said 'that you can remember'? Are there things you can't remember?"

"We all forget things," Cassane murmured distantly.

"Not you, and not this!" Harry said angrily. "This group meant something to you, you wouldn't have chosen to forget –"

"Oh, really, Potter?" Cassane snarled, spinning around and rounding on Harry. "Do you really have the slightest damned idea what we did, what your parents did – all under my orders?"

"You still wouldn't voluntarily forget," Harry spat. "Not you. You care too much."

Cassane's eyes flashed, and Harry felt a surge of very real terror, but then Cassane shoved past Harry and reached to the very top of the shelves, plucking down a single, tightly sealed crystalline vial.

"These are memories, Potter, as you well know," Cassane snarled, tossing Harry the vial with a short hard motion. "There's no need for me to show you these – I lived them, and I have no desire to see them again. But they are incomplete – there are several blanks that even I cannot fill in, up to and including my final mission, after which I woke up in the long-term ward of St. Mungo's Hospital, two and a half years later." As Harry raised the tiny vial to the light to get a closer look, Cassane seized control of his hand, with the strength and speak of a striking viper. "Watch them when you have time, and you'll understand exactly why I didn't want to enter this war to begin with!"

Harry swallowed back the lump in his throat again – this time, it was from fear. "And this'll explain the Potter Vaults –"

"It might give you the clues you need," Cassane said, his tone icy as he let go of Harry's hand. "Keep in mind, though, I was in a coma when the vaults were closed. All I know is that four people were involved in everything. Two are dead, one is in Azkaban –"

"Claudius Kemester," Harry hissed.

" – And Severus Snape," Cassane finished. "If anything, the easiest thing to do is begin your inquiries with him."

"He betrayed my parents!" Harry exclaimed furiously.

"And next time you encounter him, ask him why," Cassane replied with a twisted smile. "I'd love to see him explain that –"

It was chilling in its suddenness, but Cassane's voice stopped, as if someone had rammed something in his mouth. He didn't choke, but his eyes widened slightly as he closed his mouth, his mind racing, and from the look on his face, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know where it was going...

"We made a mistake," he whispered.

"What?" Harry asked, a note of fear creeping into his voice. "What mistake? What's going on?"

"The pattern doesn't make sense!" Cassane said, anger and fear warring for dominance in his voice as he strode right out of the room, his jacket flapping behind him. "It goes from seconds to minutes between attacks – that makes sense. But now... Harry, what time was it when you left Hogwarts?"

"I dunno, some time at night," Harry replied anxiously.

"It's midmorning," Cassane breathed, fear finally winning over anger in his voice as they reached the foyer, a crack of thunder shaking the house as he stopped below the chandelier. "That's over six hours, probably closer to eight –"

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Harry argued. "When I met with Tonks and Sirius earlier, the time separation was about four or five hours..."

The same horrible realization sunk into Harry's mind as he realized the likely truth.

"There's been another attack," he breathed. "Oh fuck."

"There's no time, you have to get back to Hogwarts," Cassane said quickly, conjuring a block of wood out of thin air with a wave of his wand. "Portus – go, Harry, hurry!"

He felt the jerk beneath his navel even as another crack of thunder split the air, and the last image Harry saw before everything began to swirl was Cassane's agonized knowing expression.

The sturdy, oaken door of the high-rise flat in Diagon Alley had taken a lot of damage over the years – unsurprising, really, considering Rita Skeeter's career of ferreting out secrets – but even it couldn't withstand the four Blasting Curses that struck it in rapid succession. The hinges groaned as the door was ripped free, slamming to the floor like a thunderclap, mimicking the tremors in the storm outside.

Into the flat came two men. One was wearing the crisp, dark robes of a professional Auror – one of the two reasons nobody had stopped them on the way up the stairs. The other reason was the other man. Robes ragged and frayed, his eyes hardly seen beneath a heavy hood and cowl, there was something feral about the way he walked, as if he was stalking an invisible target at all times. The stench of sewage and rotting meat only enhanced the image.

The hooded man sniffed twice. "It reeks in here."

"What do you expect from Skeeter?" the Auror snapped irritably, lighting his wand and carefully stepping into the room. "It's a mess in here too – whore probably fucks half her informants and lies about the ones who she doesn't screw."

The hooded man gave a low growl from the back of his throat. "Doesn't smell like that. More like bad perfume... bad consciences."

"Says Fenrir Greyback," the Auror muttered, barely audible.

"Fuck off," the hooded man spat. "Despite what you might think, I have standards. There are predators, prey, and those maggots that aren't worth hunting. She's in the last category."

"Either way, she's not here," the Auror hissed, biting back a curse as he lowered his wand. "I just checked – no human presences here."

"Good," Greyback said curtly. "Then let's torch this place and leave – I'm hungry. We should probably take some of the papers here –"

"The Dark Lord doesn't need any of it," the Auror interrupted, drawing his wand. "He already knows everything she could possibly know."

"Are those orders?"

"What do you think?"

Greyback bared his teeth. "Then I get to burn this place."

"We'll do it together, just to be sure," the Auror said with an air of finality, pulling a flask of tightly sealed Combustion Concoction from his cloak and setting it on the small table in the room.

Stepping out of the flat with Greyback, after carefully verifying that nobody was in the hall, the Auror carefully raised his wand.

"Atrum... chain... LEVITAS!"

Twin streams of lightning erupted from their wands, striking the flask, igniting the potion within –

Both of the wizards Disapparated with loud cracks – cracks obscured by the thundering explosion that rocked the entire building that consumed everything within the apartment with a rush of hot flame. The windows exploded, the building trembled from the force, and the few remaining occupants inside screamed or jumped with shock.

Nobody noticed the beetle that had darted through a crack in the floorboards and skittered away.

The storm had finally begun, and Moody was nowhere to be found.

Harry staggered slightly as a crack of lightning exploded against the sky, the thunder shaking the stones beneath his feet. He regained his

balance quickly, but his mind was racing with incomprehension – no storm could shake the castle –

"Oh, I think you'll find that it can."

He looked up, and just like every other time before, Peeves was hovering there, a supremely satisfied smile on his twisted incorporeal face, gleaming all the brighter in the sputtering torchlight.

Harry's wand was out in a flash, shakily pointing at the poltergeist. "Why this time, Peeves?" he gasped, putting a hand against a wall to steady himself as another crack of lightning shook the floor. "What... the fuck did I do this time –"

"Harry, Harry," Peeves said with a infuriatingly condescending smile, "it's not always about you."

"Then who the fuck is it this time?" Harry shouted, his patience spent as he poured every ounce of his frustration and hatred into his glare. He didn't care that Peeves was only the messenger, unrelated to the attacks – he just wanted the ghost to fucking die. "Who did they take?"

"That... that would be telling, wouldn't it?"

The thunder shook the castle, and the torches rattled in their brackets, but Harry didn't stagger - fury gave him stability, even in the worst storm that Hogwarts had seen in decades.

"Does it distress you, Harry?" Peeves said, with his best devilish, impossibly wide smile. "Does it disturb you that without your interference, none of this would have happened? Nothing like this is coincidental, you know."

His heart was hammering in his chest with sudden terror. His wand was shaking in his trembling hand. Was it possible it was his fault this time -

"This time, though, there's no Dumbledore to save you," Peeves said gleefully. "Not this time - no, the odds are far more even - and by

even I mean precipitously stacked against you. But you're the Boy-Who-Lived - I'm assuming you're used to it."

"Peeves, I fucking swear -"

"After all, you'll need to be - if you want to save her."

The jet of blue-white light erupted from his wand, but Peeves shot backwards, letting the bolt strike a nearby torch, gutting it in a shower of sparks. The laughter was ringing down the hall, mixing with the thunder in an insane cacophony -

"Oh, don't worry, I'll let you climb the lightning-struck Astronomy tower," Peeves said, his eyes widening diabolically. "And that's the point, you know. She's there, surrounded by the intangible - the things that like to make minds a bit more malleable."

"Then get the fuck out of my way before I incinerate your soul myself!" Harry shouted, his voice raw against the thunder. Hogwarts shook again. "I know the fucking spell –"

"But just a friendly warning, Harry," Peeves said, suddenly only inches from Harry's face, "I'm no prophet, but I play the odds, and no bookie's going to be knocking on my door. And the stakes are high - one of you is going off the tower tonight, and you'll have to choose. One is going to die - and the other's going to wish for a death denied. Hope you like rolling dice with Death, Harry - he always rolls snakes' eyes."

He ignored the cacophony of echoing laughter – he just ran like he had never run before, sprinting towards the nearest stairwell, racking his brain with every step. Why the fuck would anyone be up in the Astronomy Tower now in this storm? What's the significance of this...

His hand slipped on the railing as he pulled himself up two stairs at a time. Ignoring the growing tightness in his chest, he charged down the seventh floor corridor towards the narrow rickety stairwell that led to the top of the tower. Through the windows, he could see the madly

twisting net of lightning breaking and buckling against the sky, cracks splitting the air like so many shattering trees –

BOOM.

Harry fell this time, slapping his hands to his ears against the rushing pain, but he only stayed down for a second, scrabbling up the stairs, running faster and faster, the sweat beginning to slick his brow and his fingers. But he wasn't going to stop – he wasn't going to let another ghost destroy another girl. Not if I can stop it –

He hit the door running, and to his shock, it fell open beneath his wait. Awkwardly avoiding a fall, he snapped his wand up, prepared for the horror of –

"L-Luna?"

The circular room was filled with sextants, astrolabes, telescopes, and charts, but where Professor Sinistra's desk once was, in the center of the room, was a charred spot – and Luna Lovegood was hovering inches above the floor.

Her blonde hair fluttered gently around her head, bowed as if in meditation. Her eyes were closed – and from every inch of her body, she glowed with a soft aquamarine light, the only light in the room. Flickering between blue and green, it drained any colour or hint of life from her face, and made the blue of her tie and trim of her robes gleam all the brighter...

But she wasn't wearing robes the last time I saw her... Harry thought, breathing fast as raw panic set in. I need to figure out a way to get her out of this – it's not fair, it's wrong that they're attacking her –

"Luna?"

Everything went deathly silent, and Harry's wand snapped up – he couldn't even hear the thunder...

She looked up, her eyes still closed, and Harry held his breath. Maybe he'd have a chance...

And then her eyes opened.

"You're not my loved one."

The light around her went bright acid green, but Harry had seen her eyes – pure white, as if blind, but he knew she could see. Around her, he could hear a hissing... a hissing he could understand –

"Daughters misbegotten, daughters betrayed, they both sought death denied –"

"LUNA!"

The scream split his eardrums, and he immediately started moving even as the hisses turned to incoherent howling. A second later, lightning erupted from a wand Harry didn't see Luna draw, and struck the door that had been behind where he was standing.

"LUNA, IT'S HARRY!"

The howling was ear-splitting, and Harry could see another wand slide into Luna's opposite hand. Instinctively, he threw himself sideways –

Pain exploded across his body, and he smelt the sudden sizzling of charred fabric and burning flesh. He hit the ground hard, and it took everything he had not to scream as he desperately tried to ignore the pain in his abdomen –

The light grew brighter. He looked up, and saw Luna's face, her innocence twisted into a visage Harry didn't recognize. The whispers had gone silent again – the room was silent again.

"You're not my loved one..."

"Luna, snap out of it!" Harry pleaded, choking back a gasp of pain.
"This isn't you – get the fuck out of her head!"

Her visage changed – abruptly cold, dispassionate, inhuman – and the whisper returned. It wasn't from her lips, and he could understand it – it was Parseltongue.

"My head now, bitch. AVADA KEDAV-"

"NO!"

The dust cloud rocketed across the room as Harry felt the shockwave of the lightning. He felt himself flying, slamming into an astrolabe and collapsing against a table, the pain hitting his brain like a tidal wave, the wand slipping from his fingers –

He rolled onto the floor to grab his wand – a move that saved his life, as another blast of lightning from Luna's wand struck the table and smashed it into cinders.

"Pathetic, what your generation has become," the whisper hissed disdainfully. "Three hundred years ago, your type wouldn't have survived – the other one in here is living proof of that – why don't you TAKE HER!"

It was something out of a nightmare, and Harry couldn't wake up. The acid green glow had become a fiery white-blue, and Luna, taking both wands into one hand, was digging into her scalp with the other, pulling tendrils of blue-white mist free of her hair – and suddenly the mist had coalesced and was speeding towards his head –

CRACK.

It wasn't lightning, not this time, but he could see the white-blue comet ricocheting away from him, dizzily spiralling upwards. He could see gold lines cross his vision, this time criss-crossed with edges of tarnished silver. But this time, he knew what had happened – the simulamancy had protected against the possession, and now he had a second –

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

The spell blew both wands out of Luna's hand. The milky white eyes fixed on him – and then the whispers turned to screams again – but this time Harry was on his feet and ready.

"MENS FRAGOR! DAMN IT, MENS FRAGOR!"

Twin spheres of blue-white light erupted from his wand, and struck Luna straight in the head, propelling her across the room – where he heard a sickening crack.

The howling stopped.

His heart nearly stopped with sudden terror.

Oh no... not again. I couldn't have –

She still was glowing through the sparking mist and dust cloud, and he ran to where she was slumped, her head at a horrifyingly awkward angle.

"No," Harry whispered with panic, panting and choking as he frantically felt for a pulse. "No, damn it, no, not like this, no –"

And then he felt the grip on his wrist, and he saw the milky eyes snap open.

"Nice try."

"What the –"

Her other hand seized him by the throat, and he couldn't even make a sound as Luna lifted him, thrashing madly, above the ground, crushing his windpipe with her tiny hand and impossible strength. She was smiling a ghastly smile – it wasn't Luna's smile.

"A fine specimen indeed. I can hear her calling for you – it's beautiful, almost touching. But nothing's getting into your head, SIMULAMANCER. No, you may have shielded me, but you've left a single doorway open –"

He could hardly breathe, his thoughts flaking away like dead leaves in a cold autumn breeze. But the rage was coming back in force. It's not Luna, it's this deranged monster, I can't hold back –

"- but I'll leave that for later, my part is nearly completed – at least for now. You'll see me again, Potter – in Hell."

His hand clenched into a fist, and was already rising with the strength borne of desperation –

"Harry?"

CRACK.

The light was gone, plunging the room into lightning-lit blackness, and Harry fell to the floor – and so did Luna, her eyes abruptly normal.

Except for one, blackened by Harry's fist.

A rush of horror surged through him – what had he done? He desperately scrabbled for his wand, lighting it with a whispered word, only to see Luna slowly sitting up, tears trickling down her cheek –

"Oh god, Luna, you – you're –"

"Why did you hit me, Harry?" Luna asked in a quavering voice. "Why did you hit me? What did I do?"

He crawled across the floor and pulled Luna into his arms, desperately choking back his own fear and the horrible feeling of guilt welling up inside of him. "I didn't mean to – the, the ghost was strangling me, I was hitting her, I'm so sorry –"

She pulled away from his grasp, and before Harry could scream out her name, she had run up the stairs, towards the open observatory –

"LUNA!"

He could see her robes, now ragged, fluttering behind her. He reached out to grab a hold, to pull her back, to somehow explain –

The sleet hit him like an iron curtain.

Most of the ceiling of the top of the tower had been blasted away, and Harry wrapped his robes around him tightly as he staggered onto the landing. The wind was howling now, ice cold and tearing at his robes like so many grasping tentacles...

And there she was, standing at the edge of the tower, where the railing had been blown to fragments. The rain, the sleet, the shrieking of the gale, the calamitous bangs of the lightning, none of it moved her. None of it fazed her. It was like she was a statue, looking out into the storm, her hair soaked back like that of a drowning ghost, lost in the depths of the storm.

...a drowning ghost, lost in the depths of the storm...

Fear gripped him, along with the horrifying feeling of déjà vu, that he had seen it all before, that he knew what was going to happen, what she would say –

"No," he whispered, now knowing the reason behind the words, as he watched her bare foot step ever closer to the broken ledge. "Please..."

"We've both come too far to back out, Isabelle," Luna whispered. "You know that as well as I."

"Please..." Now he understood why it had come to this – but he wasn't going to let it end, he had to do something!

"Don't feel bad, Harry, it's not the end."

He could somehow hear her, despite the storm, seemingly muted as he tried to step closer against the wall of wind. He wasn't going to let this happen –

Then Luna turned, and Harry could see the livid bruise outlining her sky-blue eyes, but there was something wrong about them, something otherworldly, something possessed –

The mist had been another ghost – and it's still –

"The boundaries are down," Luna said, her eyes flat and blank, and Harry felt true horror pounding in his heart at the off-key, sing-song words. No, no...

"So I merely... cross over."

"NO!"

Her bare foot slipped on the wet stone of the edge -

He ran, his shoes skidding on the slick and icy stones –

She fell –

And he could only see her face as he followed her.

"Harry, wake up..."

He muttered something unintelligible and groaned, rolling away from the nagging voice, pulling his pillow closer. Go away, I'm tired, I need sleep –

"Potter!"

"Go 'way," Harry groaned, keeping his eyes tightly shut. "I'm sleeping –"

SPLASH.

"Professor Moody!"

"You're not sleeping anymore," Moody said with a satisfied smile as he lowered his wand and watched as Harry sat bolt upright, swearing. "Besides, we have work to do."

Harry ran a hand through his sodden hair and glared at Moody before looking around the room. Crowded around his bed was Ron, Neville, the Weasley twins, an extremely stern-looking Professor McGonagall, and –

"Luna!"

She was standing closest to him, her usual benign smile returning to her face the second Harry met her eyes. Without warning, he scrambled out of bed and pulled her into a tight embrace, a rush of relief surging through him. Oh thank Merlin, she survived – we survived! But how...

"Harry, your gratitude is much appreciated," Luna said with a slight grin. "However, you are rather wet right now, and –"

"Right, sorry," Harry said, sitting back on the bed and turning towards Moody. "But I thought we were both goners –"

"You should have been," Moody growled, all hints of happiness gone from his face, replaced by a dour expression of disapproval. "Potter,

what the hell were you thinking, leaping off the Astronomy Tower like that? You could have been killed!"

"I should be dead," Harry muttered, accepting Ron's proffered towel and beginning to wipe his face. "I remember grabbing her, and trying to cast that peto terra spell –"

"That explains the flaming crater surrounding your landing," Professor McGonagall said curtly.

"But that wouldn't have saved me," Harry continued, turning to Moody. "Did you –"

"When that massive blast of lightning hit the Astronomy Tower, Professor McGonagall and I headed toward the tower, and it was just our luck that we saw the two of you fall," Moody said gruffly, folding his arms across his chest. "And you're a lucky son-of-a-bitch that I'm still as fast as I used to be. Nailed you with a Cushioning Charm just before you went over the edge."

"And the fall still broke half of the bones in your body," Neville said in a hushed voice. "It was scary – you managed to block Luna, but you're lucky to be alive, Harry."

Harry let out a deep breath and finally surveyed the room. It was the Hospital Wing, as he had expected, and a cheerful deluge of light was flooding the hall. "But what about the spirits –"

"Both gone, as far as I can tell," Professor McGonagall said solemnly. "That was a very brave thing you did, Mr. Potter – very brave and very stupid."

"On that note, what the hell were you thinking, going after her alone like that?" Moody growled. "You were lucky as hell –"

"The two ghosts were competing against each other, for control," Harry said quickly. "From the glow that Luna was emitting, I'm guessing that one was Slytherin, one was Ravenclaw. The first one was a bloody sociopath, and the other... the other was –"

"Suicidal," Luna finished softly. "She seized control right after the other left. I'm sorry, Harry."

"Damn it, don't apologize, Luna, I'm the one who should be sorry," Harry said, shaking his head. "How's your eye?"

"All healed up," she replied cheerfully. "You have a nice left hook, Isabelle."

Fred and George both stifled snickers, but Moody immediately pounced. "Who's Isabelle? Luna, why did you just call Harry –"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Professor," Luna replied innocently. "Now if you'd excuse me, I'd like to go start my Transfiguration homework, if you don't need me."

Moody looked apoplectic, but Professor McGonagall waved her hand, and Luna left the room, an unusual spring in her step.

"Bloody mental, that girl is," Ron muttered.

"Wait, aren't we going to interrogate her?" Harry demanded. "She had two spirits in her head, she might know where the origin of these attacks is!"

"We already spoke at length with her on the subject, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said crisply. "Unfortunately, due to the conflicting consciences within her during that time, her memory is patchy about the entire endeavour."

"Damn," Harry muttered, slumping back on his pillows. "So close..."

"I need to debrief you, Potter," Moody said sternly, conjuring a stiff wooden chair out of thin air and setting it next to Harry's bed. "And it would do well for McGonagall and the twins to hear this as well. I need everything that Cassane talked to you about."

"Wait, what about me?" Ron asked angrily. "I'm Harry's best friend, and –"

"Are you willing to fight, then?" Moody snarled, rounding on Ron. "Willing to risk your life against an enemy you have no comprehension of, one that will kill you without a second glance? And what about you, Longbottom?"

Neville swallowed hard, but his face didn't pale. "I- I'll stay if Harry lets me. I'm ready."

"And so am I," Ron said, moving closer next to Harry, his voice stony and his eyes fixed on Moody – and for the first time, Harry saw the real impact of Charlie's death on his friend.

"They're ready," Harry said softly, closing his eyes against a rush of emotion. They shouldn't be, but they're ready now. God...

His eyes snapped open almost instantly, though. It took a few seconds for his brain to process who he had seen in the gap between people, sitting on the bed on the other side of the Hospital Wing. What the...

She was sitting alone, twisting the edge of the sheet in her hand nervously, but there was something grimly resolute about her expression that set Harry's stomach on edge.

Abruptly, he wondered why exactly she was there in the first place. Maybe it was for Luna – but then again, as far as I know, the two of them had nothing to do with each other... unless she's coming here to gloat...

Moody noticed the direction of Harry's gaze in a second, and his gaze hardened. "Looking at someone, Potter?" he asked, his voice bitterly sardonic.

"Why is she here?" Harry asked quietly. "Professor, why the fuck is Hermione Granger in this Hospital Wing right now? She looks the last thing from sick –"

"I'm assuming you want an explanation, Potter. Weasley –"

"That's damn right I want an explanation, because I have nothing to say to her –" Harry began heatedly.

Ron grabbed Harry's shoulder. "She's here because –"

"Ron, I don't give a damn about what the hell she's here for!"

"Even if it was for you?"

Harry's eyes narrowed sceptically. "Yeah, bullshit."

"You know, I'd actually like to be included in your conversations, rather than just talked about like some object, you know!"

Harry blinked twice as Hermione rose from her seat and stormed towards them. If anything, her hair looked bushier and worse than normal, and from one look at her face, it appeared as though she hadn't slept in days – something which was common in everyone standing around Harry's bed.

Harry returned her glare with open hostility – even in a hospital bed, he wasn't going to show weakness. Not now – for once, he had succeeded, after a fashion, and he did have an idea what was going on. He wasn't going to kowtow to her knowledge – not this time. This time, Hermione, I'm the one ahead of the game.

"Harry does raise a good point, though," Fred said roughly, sliding around the bed to get a better glaring angle at Hermione. "Why are you here? Last time you were around us –"

"I remember her distinctly condemning our efforts as suicidal," George finished dangerously. "And that we had no chance of succeeding."

Hermione looked around the group uneasily and slowly cleared her throat. "Uh, well –"

It was sudden, and Harry could hardly hold back his gasp of shock, but Ron had released his grip on Harry's shoulder – only to grab the front of Hermione's robes.

"Don't you dare," he whispered, his eyes dilating as his hand shook.
"Don't you fucking dare say –"

"Mr. Weasley, there will not be fighting here!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed angrily, wrenching Ron's hand free and shoving him back with surprising strength.

"I dunno, Professor, it's pretty damned insensitive for her to make comments like these when she's lost nothing," George snarled.

"Especially coupled with the fact that without her little letter causing Cassane to enter this conflict," Fred continued, slowly pulling his wand from his robe pocket, "Charlie might still be alive –"

"ENOUGH!" Moody roared, stomping his wooden leg with a surprisingly loud bang. "These events are far too complicated to be blamed on a single eventuality, and fighting amongst ourselves solves nothing! At least Potter has mostly been cured of his moronic behaviour – now it seems it's merely transferred itself into you two." He scowled furiously, but then he rounded on Hermione. "And right now, nobody gives a flying Quidditch fuck about whether you were right, one way or another."

"Like it or not," Professor McGonagall began severely, "Professor Moody is correct – we need to find the culprits of the spiritual attacks, and bring them to justice immediately, and I have reason to believe that Mr. Potter here does indeed have some new information that we all could utilize. Mr. Potter?"

Harry paused for a long few seconds, considering what he should say – or indeed, if he should say anything. He had trusted Hermione, but that trust was damaged, and he had said things that he wasn't sure he could take back if he wanted to.

She's on our side, but is she on my side?

The first thing he noticed was the cold.

It was familiar – horrifyingly familiar.

"So you're awake. Took you long enough."

He jerked up, rubbing his eyes frantically as he looked around for the source of the voice. It was raspy, with a faint accent he didn't recognize, but it was a voice, which meant someone was there, and it wasn't the damned poltergeist –

"You need a light?"

There was a striking of a match, and a second later, a tiny wispy candle ignited, and he could see where he was. He was lying on a stiff, solitary mattress magically fused into the wall – if one could call the craggy and uneven rock face a wall at all. Stalactites hung low over the tiny darkened room, and he could see a few links of broken chain hanging from between the jagged spikes. On the floor were a battered desk and chair, a stubby candle, a heap of quills, inkbottles, and paper, and in the corner, a single smooth hole. On three sides, he could see raw, untamed stone, a tiny nook in a cavern.

On the fourth, a snarled, fused mesh of black iron bars, each an inch thick. And outside it was a hooded figure...

His breath caught in his throat. It couldn't – it couldn't be –

"No," he whispered. "No..."

"What, are you surprised?" the raspy voice said with a snort.

"This..." he gasped, his voice hoarse with disbelief as he slowly approached the bars, "this can't be right. They can't do this to me! They can't fucking do this to me!"

"Sorry, but I think you'll find that they can," the raspy voice said conversationally. "Really sucks to be you."

"I'M A FUCKING HIT WIZARD, YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!"

The cloaked figure turned, and the awful cold he remembered rushed through him. He staggered back quickly, hitting his head against a stray stalactite, and just as quickly, the Dementor turned away.

"Once again, I think you'll find that they can," the raspy voice said, with a hint of a snort. "You'll get used to it. And so, welcome to Azkaban – hope you enjoy your stay, however long or short it might be. Considering where you are, I'm guessing long. And don't feed the Dementors – but that should be obvious."

"W-Where am I?" he asked, looking around his room – his cell, he realized, with a pang of horror.

"Solitary, obviously," the raspy voice said snidely, "but this is high-security. Whatever the hell you did, you're not getting out of here on your own, unless you're Sirius Black or something."

"I was hunting for that bastard," he breathed, slumping against his mattress as a wave of despair crushed against him. He had failed. I've taken Harry Potter's place...

"Basics around here are simple," the raspy voice said lightly, with the air of somebody reading a list. "Food comes three times a day, and it's terrible. Get used to it. The hole in the corner can produce tiny amounts of water or bring away waste. It also acts as the drain whenever a Dementor comes by and you need to throw up. It'll also produce a single geyser once a day for a few seconds for you to shower off, and there's a towel under your bed. Otherwise, have fun."

"I've got to get out of here –"

"Forget it," the raspy voice said smoothly. "You're not getting out. Cigarette?"

"They – they let you have those things in here?" he said, unbelieving.

"Yeah, and these shitty little matches too," the raspy voice said. "Just enough to light up – theory goes that if you can enjoy it, the soul-eating parasites will get some of those positive emotions, and you'll stay alive a little longer – maybe."

"Are you sure?"

"No, but the Warden thinks it's a worth a damn to try," the raspy voice replied irritably, and he could almost hear the shrug of shoulders. "Why do you think that he put all three Lestranges in the same bloody reinforced cell? He figures the more Bellatrix fucks Rodolphus' brains out, it'll keep the Dementors placated. Of course, it draws them like maggots to meat."

He fought to control his breathing. "I need to talk to the Warden."

"That won't happen."

"Listen, you fucker –"

"Don't insult somebody you don't even know, it's rude," the raspy voice said reprovably. "The name's Tony, you stupid fuck – who might you be?"

"Kemester," he said after a long few seconds. "Dmitri Kemester."

"Huh," Tony said after another long few seconds. "Interesting."

"Why is that interesting?" Kemester demanded.

"Because your father's in here –"

"I have nothing to say to that treasonous –" Kemester snarled heatedly.

"And he's dying."

Kemester's next words caught in his throat against a rush of emotion. "What?"

"Frankly, I'm amazed he lasted this long," Tony said conversationally. Kemester peered through the bars, but the other man was hidden in shadows, completely concealed in the darkness. "He was an old man when they brought him in – either way, he'll be dead by Yule."

"You celebrate Christmas in Azkaban?" Kemester asked disbelievingly, grabbing a hold of the bars and peering into the cell opposite, where Tony was lurking.

"Not exactly," Tony replied, his voice filled with restrained glee. "You see, your father's a loose end – as he is, he's not much use – and when the Warden dies at Yule, loose ends will have to be tied up."

"Why is the Warden dying –"

"Because Santa Claus is coming to Azkaban this year," Tony whispered, "and he's giving all the naughty boys and girls a present we've been dying for, a present to be earned."

"What?"

"Freedom."

Harry closed the door of Moody's office with a heavy sigh. More than anything, he wanted to go straight back to sleep, but he knew that the ex-Auror was in no mood for that.

Any second now...

BANG.

"Potter!"

"I'm right here, Professor," Harry said dully, sliding listlessly into his chair and rubbing his temples, his headache steadily getting worse.

"I can see that. What I can't see is your new angle for wanting to bring Miss Granger in on this – from everything the Weasley twins told me, I half-expected you to toss her out on her ass, regardless of anything McGonagall would say on the matter!" Moody slammed his wand down on his desk and stared beadily at Harry. "Well? What's your new 'plan', Potter?"

"Like it or not, Cassane wouldn't be on our side if it wasn't for that damned letter that she sent to him," Harry retorted, slamming his palms against the arms of his chair. "And he actually bought her theories, albeit with corrections, which makes me think we're on the right trail with these attacks. And finally, the more people who can comb the library for clues, the better. She'll have completely plausible deniability – she's always in the Library."

Moody stared at Harry distrustfully for a long few seconds. "Why don't I believe you?"

"Why would I lie?"

"You've got another angle on this, Potter – something I don't trust," Moody growled. "Or the convenient fact of how you've been able to slip out of the school and contact Cassane right out from under my nose – twice."

"I told you, it's between Tonks and I," Harry snapped, rising to his feet and running a hand through his hair. "And on that note, I should be leaving the school soon, to speak with her in person. I need to get answers on what's happening outside Hogwarts."

"Well, the Ministry still hasn't stabilized, that much I can tell you," Moody said harshly, sitting down in his desk chair, his electric-blue eye never leaving from Harry. "The goblins are fighting for better terms, the investigation into your little mission into the Ministry is hitting a score of dead ends – you can probably thank your friend Cassane for that – and there still has been no news about Dumbledore's whereabouts."

"There couldn't have been that many places for him to have disappeared between Gringotts and the Ministry," Harry said intently, beginning to pace. "Is it possible he was trapped somehow? And what about Fawkes?"

"The phoenix hasn't been sighted since Dumbledore's disappearance," Moody said grimly, "and I'd love to see the magic that could trap Dumbledore. But it's been a crazy few weeks, that's for damn sure."

Harry froze in mid-step. "Few weeks?"

"Yeah," Moody said with a scowl. "Outside, of course. You've only been out for two days in here, but as far as McGonagall can tell, it's been approximately thirty-two days outside of Hogwarts. Give or take, for every day here, sixteen days pass outside."

Harry's mind spun. He sat back down abruptly, trying to regain control. "But that doesn't make sense – from the rough estimations Cassane and I made, that would mean that there should have been another attack –"

"Or that this temporal slowdown is proceeding exponentially instead of regularly," Moody finished grimly. "Which is not good for us by any stretch of the mind, which is why most of the Order is currently trying to find Dumbledore as quickly as possible – of any wizard alive right now, he stands the best chance of reversing our little temporal problem –"

The knock on Moody's door surprised both of them, if only for a split second. Moody seemed to visibly tense, his hand snapping to his wand.

"What?"

The door opened a few inches, and Harry clenched his jaw as Hermione poked her head inside. "Professor, if possible –"

"I don't have all bloody day, Granger, what?" Moody barked.

"Can I talk to Harry for a few minutes?"

Harry exchanged a cool, dispassionate glance with Moody – all of which disguised the raging emotions churning inside his gut. Did he want to talk to her, and likely get drawn into another argument that would leave her in tears?

Did he even really care?

"Fine," he said listlessly, rising from his seat, rubbing the temple where his headache was swelling, and closing the door tightly behind him.

The second the door clicked, Hermione began to speak. "Harry –"

"Shut up for a second, I need to make sure nobody's listening," Harry interrupted, raising his wand and muttering the words to a charm he remembered scrawled on the list of spells Tonks had given him. "There, now what?"

She took a deep breath, and for a brief second, Harry enjoyed the look of complete uncertainty on Hermione's face – after all, it was refreshing to see somebody besides himself not know something, and he was getting bloody sick of dead ends.

"How... how are you feeling?" she finally asked hesitantly, shoving some stray hair away from her face.

Harry snorted. "Bloody fantastic, what the hell do you think? Honestly, Hermione, if that's what you called me out here for –"

"I can't say I'm not concerned –"

"Ron's still pissed at you, I bet, though," Harry continued, disgust leaking into his voice. "Merlin, Hermione, you'd think you'd have some bloody common sense after everything we've seen –"

"It only proves my point –"

Harry moved without warning. Before he could hardly register the motion, he had drawn his wand, and pointed it under Hermione's chin. "Do not even fucking go there. You weren't there – I was. Until you fight your way out of hell, you can't tell me shit about anything I might say or do regarding the Ministry – clear?"

Hermione stared steadily back at Harry, and to his modest surprise, she wasn't crying this time. "Look, I don't approve of the way you're doing things, but right now, we're all in this together –"

"Damn right we are," Harry spat.

Hermione swallowed hard, momentarily lost for words. She took a deep, shuddering breath as she tried to meet Harry's eyes again. "Harry, I want to be on your side, I... I just can't agree with... with what you've done. You haven't been a leader -"

"Oh, you've got to be bloody kidding me," Harry said with absolute disgust, pulling his wand away and shoving it violently in his pocket. "Haven't you gotten the clue that I don't want that?"

"Harry, you might not care about how other people see you, but nobody at Hogwarts really has seen much good from you," Hermione began tentatively. "And, I mean, the last time most of your class saw you was when you tried to drown Malfoy in that acid!"

Harry folded his arms across his chest. "And tell me that wasn't a good thing, I dare you."

"All it did was piss off Malfoy and tell the rest of the school that you've lost control of your rage!" Hermione retorted. "I've been trying a quieter approach, trying to spy on him and get information about what he's up to – because pretty much anybody with a brain knows he's in thick –"

"Except for the minor fact that moving against him could be suicidal, because we don't know what magic he's utilizing to control the fucking ghosts, I know," Harry interrupted tersely. "So what's your point, that I need to be concerned about my image? Hermione, I don't need to justify my actions to you, or any of the students – I have stronger, more competent allies, and let's face it, there are very few people here who are in any way prepared for what's actually out there." His eyes flashed. "Believe me, I know."

Hermione took another steadying breath. "All I suspect now is that between Malfoy and his two newest cronies, Nott and Zabini, something's going on –"

"And that's why Moody's got the twins invisibly spying on them," Harry finished shortly. "Okay, what else?"

Hermione suddenly looked very, very uneasy. "H-Harry, when you explained that time thing in the Hospital Wing, and with everything C-Cassane said about my theory – well, there's an anomaly."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Well, he said magic runs on patterns – the Ravenclaw girls first, then Filch and the Creevey brothers... and then Luna getting possessed by a Slytherin ghost and a Ravenclaw ghost. I'm just thinking... what happened to the Hufflepuff?"

Harry closed his eyes, his headache pounding as he considered Hermione's words. "The pattern doesn't make sense..."

Hermione looked quickly around the corridor, and suddenly leaned very close to Harry – something that made him more uncomfortable than he dared show.

"Harry," she whispered, "I think a Hufflepuff has already been attacked."

"What?"

"Ernie Macmillan," Hermione said in a low voice, her terrified eyes shooting back and forth down the corridor. "He disappeared for a few days... and when he reappeared, something hasn't seemed right about him. I tried talking to him, and everything seemed perfectly normal, but he was planning on exposing everything to the school about the attacks... and then he disappeared, right after he, Ron and I ran into Malfoy, Zabini, and Nott on the seventh floor."

"And you haven't told Moody this?" Harry asked incredulously. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I don't have proof, and everything I've seen of him has been perfectly normal –"

Harry let out a long breath of frustration. "I can't bloody believe this. I honestly can't believe this, Hermione – what the hell are you trying to

prove here? This could be his sanity we're talking about – you want him ending up like Cho and Su Li and those other girls in the Hospital Wing? Why the hell haven't you told somebody yet?"

"The teachers are stretched too thin, trying to cover up the time dilation and the attacks –"

"Not a fucking excuse, Hermione!" Harry snarled. "Just tell me!"

She tried to swallow back her tears, but it didn't work this time. She quickly brought her hand to her face, but Harry could see the moisture flooding her eyes. "Harry, Malfoy knows I suspect him! I-if I tell anyone, I-I don't know what he'll do, and w-with you g-gone –"

Harry stepped back, his mind reeling. So this was why she hadn't told anyone. No fancy reason, no trumped up explanation – just sheer, natural terror. Fear that the unseen attackers would strike her the second she told another soul. Fear that she would end up just like the poor girls in the hospital wing, their sanities shattered and adrift.

I can't blame her for fear. I can't blame her for being weak.

His mind raced while she sobbed, leaning against the wall as she choked back tears. He didn't know what he could say to comfort her – not now. But for a second, he desperately wished he could. He wanted to comfort his old friend when she was crying, he wanted to be there for her. She's alone...

And so am I. I've just learned to deal with it.

"You might be terrified to tell Moody about this," he began in a grim voice, "but I'm not. Thank you."

And without another word, he yanked open the office store and strode in, slamming it loudly behind him. Moody, who had been writing furiously in his book, stood up quickly.

"What was that all –"

"You need to find Ernie Macmillan and use every fucking exorcism spell we have on him," Harry cut the ex-Auror off, striding to the front of the room. "Hermione thinks he was possessed at some point, and we need every damn bit of information we can get. Not only that, he would fill in the link in the pattern."

"In more than one way," Moody said softly, cursing under his breath. "Ravenclaw girl, Gryffindor boy, Slytherin girl, Hufflepuff boy, Ravenclaw girl. It's an alternating gender pattern, and with Lovegood's dual possessions, the anomaly in the pattern has been repaired. Damn, Voldemort thought this one through."

"It's worse," Harry growled. "Hermione thinks Malfoy suspected her and Ernie, and that he attacked the Hufflepuff to get her to shut up. Scare tactics."

"Didn't think those would work on Granger."

"Nor, apparently, did I," Harry said darkly. "You know what, I could really use some fucking good news right now!"

Suddenly, Moody's electric-blue eye gleamed. "Then I do have something that might interest you – something I didn't inform the rest of our little group of investigators of yet."

"Why?" Harry asked suspiciously, as Moody yanked open a desk drawer and began rooting through it.

"Because I wanted you to see it for yourself," Moody said with a hint of a smirk, tossing Harry a resealed envelope with a familiar crest on it that he had last seen on an old gate...

Harry's heart jumped into his throat. He tore open the envelope with shaking hands and read:

Dear Mr. Potter,

No point in wasting ink with pleasantries, particularly considering the chaos with the Prophet. And, obviously, I cannot say much, even

though I doubt this particular message will be intercepted. But I do have good news.

To discuss everything further, we must meet at the Hog's Head pub in Hogsmeade on December 23rd – You-Know-Who is on the move, and it is time we force him to react to our plans, rather than the other way around. Mr. Black and Miss Tonks will both be there, I can assure you.

And to end on a high note, I spoke with our man in the Department of Mysteries, and Mr. Bode has a little something for the two of us that simplify our problems at Hogwarts immensely.

I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Nathan Cassane

Harry felt a rush of elation. Finally, some answers – finally, we're getting the initiative!

But then the happiness was immediately subsumed by confusion. "Why didn't you tell the others this?"

"Because I don't trust Nathan Cassane," Moody said roughly. "Apparently, you do, and frankly, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'd rather hear the news confirmed by you and my protégé than from his mouth only. So regardless of your views on this matter -"

"I'm going," Harry said quickly, rushing towards the door of his tiny quarters for his cloak. "And with the time dilation, I've got to go now!"

"Of course," Moody muttered to himself. "Just keep your eyes on the truth, Potter, and not my protégé, who I would bet will be very happy to see you."

He pulled his hood tighter, concealing more of his face, as he slid carefully into the dank and shadowy booth. Unsurprisingly, the old

wood creaked badly as he settled his weight and stared at the hooded figure across from him.

It wasn't for him to go here for tips – not this part of Knockturn Alley, where marginalized near-humans wandered and preyed upon those idiotic enough to get in their way. Even in this bad excuse for a tavern, which he regarded it as more of a cross between a horse stable and a charnel house, if only because of the unique and distinctive odours of piss, vomit, and blood. Even here, where there was a modicum of civility, he knew it wasn't safe for his kind.

He slid further into the shadows, hoping that the dim, flickering light from the stub of a candle set into the table wouldn't reveal the tell-tale scars on his face – scars that any Hit Wizard would acquire with any length of time. At least I'm not as distinctive as Kemester, he thought uneasily, remembering his former partner and wishing he could run a hand through his close-cropped bristly hair. It was a nervous habit, one of the reasons he had adopted that particular hair style –

"You're early, Hit Wizard."

"Figured we could get this done quickly, so I can leave," Reed Larshall replied quickly – too quickly. Swearing silently, he laid his left hand on the table – a silent sign that his right hand was holding a wand pointed directly at the ragged-looking cloaked man sitting opposite him. The man's voice was muffled, but yet strangely familiar...

"No need for threats, Larshall," the cloaked man said with faint amusement. "After all, you can't threaten a dead man."

Larshall knew the voice then, and he nearly started as he saw a few long blond hairs escaping the edge of the man's hood. He fought to control his instinctive short inhalation of breath that would have betrayed his surprise. Can't show surprise or weakness... knowing him, he'll capitalize on it...

"How did you survive?"

"It wasn't difficult for a man of my talents," Lucius Malfoy replied icily, folding his hands on the table. "The rest of the wizarding world may think I'm dead, but the people who need to know of my survival know."

"You did a good job covering your tracks –"

"You mean the Ministry did," Lucius interrupted bitterly. "We were scapegoats –"

"From what Kemester told me, you were just as much an instigator –"

"I don't need your smug bastardization of this issue, when you have a much bigger problem on your hands," Lucius said curtly. "I would have not emerged from hiding if not for a very good reason."

"The Ministry cannot provide you aid in this, Malfoy," Larshall said uneasily, already knowing that it wasn't what the very dangerous former Death Eater was seeking. It can't hurt to feign some ignorance... "The goblins would find out –"

"One of the reasons we're eating here in this festering excuse for an outhouse instead of at a reasonable location," Malfoy spat, glaring with disgust around the shabby and filthy Knockturn Alley establishment cordially known as the 'Vampire's Armpit'. "Not even goblins will descend this far into the alley."

"Much further and you'll be deep enough to be in werewolf territory," Larshall muttered, wishing silently that he had had the common sense to bring more backup than just the five Hit Wizards hidden in the heaps of garbage outside.

Lucius let loose a brief, cold bark of laughter. "Hit Wizard, you're already in werewolf territory. Greyback knows that all of you are here, and it is only my protection at the present that prevents... unfortunate confrontations."

"He wouldn't dare attack a Hit Wizard – he'd risk another potential cull –"

"The Ministry doesn't have the gall yet to unleash that sort of attack," Malfoy said scornfully.

"With Fudge's current popularity, maybe," Larshall countered, his hand tightening on his wand. "But all he would need is to send a few Dementors down here – let's see if all those happy memories the werewolves have can keep them at bay."

Lucius' eyes hardened. "Regardless, I have a warning for you and the Ministry – something you must take back to your superiors as quickly as possible."

"I hardly think that you are in the position to be giving me –"

"The Dark Lord Voldemort is alive, powerful and planning an attack upon Azkaban on the eve of Yule."

Larshall's mouth fell open. "W-What? But how –"

"He plans to murder the warden – a former comrade of yours, I believe – freeing all the prisoners and seizing control of the entire fortress – including all of the wands." Lucius lowered his voice and fixed the Hit Wizard with a beady stare. "I cannot emphasize the gravity of this charge."

Larshall wracked his mind for words. "B-But he can't be back, he was –"

The bang was muted by the clamour of the bar, and Larshall's eyes snapped to the Dark Mark, a blazing red, on Lucius Malfoy's arm. It was proof – every Hit Wizard knew that mark, and knew what it meant if it was that shade of red.

"I cannot," Lucius hissed, "give you any more incontrovertible proof than this."

Larshall's mind reeled. But that meant –

"Fudge knows –"

"He refuses to believe it," Lucius said softly, "which is partially by the Dark Lord's design and elsewhere by his own fear of Dumbledore's ascent. Of course, Dumbledore and his pathetic Order knew all along, thanks to Potter – and I suspect by now Scrimgeour knows as well."

"He knows? But why can't –"

"It's politics, you idiot! You know better than I do that Scrimgeour's position is perilous!"

"That's why you went to Kemester in the Ministry," Larshall said suddenly, his eyes lighting up with sudden clarity. "He was figuring it out, and you went to silence him –"

"That was different," Malfoy growled, "and that was then. This is now. Kemester's in Azkaban now, and will likely die with the rest of the traitors when the cells are broken."

"You can't just –"

"Oh, I think you'll find the Dark Lord can," Malfoy snapped, a surprising note of bitterness in his voice.

"I should arrest you right now, you self-righteous son-of-a –" Larshall snarled, his voice rising dangerously as he began to lurch to his feet, but Malfoy snatched the edge of his cowl.

"Sit down, Larshall, you'll want to hear the rest of what I have to say."

"Look, I know more than anyone that Kemester did a lot of bad things – some really fucking bad things," Larshall began, his voice unsteady as he fought to control his rising anger, "but he doesn't deserve to die in Azkaban, not for –"

"He's on his own when the fortress is broken open," Malfoy said, his voice brittle and cold as he released. "And I didn't think you cared."

"As soon as I found out he was in that damned prison, I've been trying to get him out –"

"He treated you like garbage," Malfoy said smugly.

Larshall gritted his teeth against the uncomfortable truth. "He was my partner – goddamn it, that means something. He'd do it for me."

"I doubt –"

"He'd do it," Larshall snarled. This time he took a hold of Malfoy's cowl with the same iron grip of any man committed and a bit desperate to believe something. "We were partners."

Lucius looked as though he was fighting not to roll his eyes. "Fine – waste your precious life rescuing a bitter, domineering, irrational burnt shell of a man – have fun. I, however, have a very important reason for being here – not so you could express your commitment to a man who would never return the favour."

Larshall's grip shook on Malfoy's cowl, but didn't release. "I'm listening."

"Then listen carefully," Malfoy whispered, his voice dropping even lower as he leaned closer. For the first time, Larshall could get a clear glimpse at Lucius' face – and he didn't look good. There were lines forming around his eyes, and his hair was untidy around his face. "The Dark Lord has made it clear to his servants that the relevant and working agencies within the Ministry are informed of his attack upon Azkaban. What I'm here to inform you of is the inevitability of this attack – and how you will not win."

Larshall snorted. "That's insane, Azkaban's the most heavily guarded and protected fortress –"

"The Dementors are not yours," Malfoy hissed. "And the Dark Lord has been very busy gathering his army. I can only say that you are lucky the giants have not mobilized on his behalf. And you will be facing the worst of his Death Eaters – and what is left of the Ministry? Many Hit Wizards and Aurors have died in the past few months, Larshall – your forces are depleted. The Ministry cannot save Azkaban. It will become a meat grinder if you try."

The Hit Wizard could hardly believe what he was hearing – but in the back of his mind, he realized the truth. Both Aurors and Hit Wizards staffed Azkaban to keep the Dementors at bay, but it was a token force. Even with reinforcements...

It will become a deathtrap.

There were a long few seconds of stillness. Somewhere in the bar, a near-human creature bellowed a challenge to a trio of hags in the corner, and there was the smashing of a broken chair.

"Wh-why are you telling me this?" Larshall finally asked, fighting to keep the tremble from his voice.

"Two reasons."

"And those are?"

Malfoy moved like a striking viper. His hand snapped out and seized Larshall's forearm, his fingers curling around it. His grey eyes glittered with awful, icy intensity.

"Because you are a part of this, Reed Larshall."

His mind went blank at the words, and he trembled violently in his seat. His muscles seized, and he struggled against a spasm in his legs. But he couldn't look away from Malfoy, he couldn't listen to anything but the Death Eater's smooth words...

"The second reason is that I came here on my own accord," Malfoy said softly, "and that I need someone to place an appeal to some very powerful men. The Ministry hasn't been able to tear up my bank overnight – not for the goblins' lack of trying – and I have powerful connections that could be of great use to the Ministry. All they need to do is say the right words, and give me and my family what we need. I've given too much, and have received nothing – that must change."

"What... are you... changing –"

"There are no 'sides' in this conflict, Larshall," Malfoy hissed, shaking his head almost wistfully. "The old days of the First War are dead – things have changed."

"What," Larshall whispered, "do you... want then?"

Malfoy's lip curled with disgust as he spat a single word, a word representing something that the Hit Wizard had never thought or dreamed a Malfoy would ever request.

"Asylum."

Yes, times have changed indeed.

He couldn't keep track of time.

The meals began to blur together, between sleeping and waking and sleeping and waking again. It was so dark, and so colourless, and so cold – even in the darkness, he could swear he saw his breath.

He shivered and pulled his tattered robes more tightly around him as he huddled against his rock of a mattress, holding the shrivelled candle in his trembling hands. The tiny flame quivered with his every breath, and he took care to breathe easily, to preserve the little flame...

"It's nearly time, you know."

Kemester jerked up and peered through the bars. The shadows were too deep, he couldn't see Tony's face across the hall, but he could hear his voice, surprisingly filled with a hungry life.

"Time?" Kester asked listlessly, moving a hand to his cracked and scarred face. It was hideous, grotesque, this mutilation. He hadn't been particularly attractive before joining the Ministry, but now he looked like a walking corpse. Should save them all the time, I'm already in a grave -

"Yeah," Tony said, his voice filled with irritation. "I already told you about it. Fuck, are you going to start losing your memory on me now? Goddamnit, I hate it when that happens around here – stupid Dementors."

He heard a rustle as Tony lit a cigarette. Through the bars, Kemester could see the tiny embers – hardly a spot of light. Not even worth considering... nothing but flaming ashes...

He could feel emotion creeping into his mind. Not glee, or rage, or even fear. No, this was something insidious, something quiet, something that he knew was half his own making and half something the Dementors were spewing into the air. He choked back the sudden lump in his throat as he began to recognize the emotion – sadness. That cold shaky despair that came at funerals in the pouring rain, where the few people standing around the grave don't know what to say...

"Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"Do... do you ever wonder... ever wonder why we're here?" Kemester asked through the lump in his throat, forcing free the words.

There was a muffled snort. "I know why I'm here. I heard the charges."

"No, not that... it's just, have you ever wondered why we're here, in this world –"

"You might be a fucking, degenerating mess, but listen: one thing is damn certain, Kemester," Tony interrupted, his voice dripping with contempt. "You want to know what that thing is? I'll tell you: dead is dead. If something's after, that's great, but who says I can count on it? Nah, I'd rather live – at least I can understand this life. What, Kemester, are you telling me you don't understand the purpose of your life now?"

"I wanted to fight Dark wizards like my father," Kemester whispered, "and when my mother died, the three of us took care of each other. Then I went to Hogwarts... and then they came and took my father away... brought him here, and I never saw them take him. Do you know when the last time I saw my father was, Tony?"

"Not to be offensive, but I really don't give a damn," Tony replied, a note of forced reasonableness in his voice.

"It was on the Platform..." Kemester murmured. "Bartholomew waved, but I didn't – I was still angry about the argument we had the night before. I could have waved... I could have, I could have. And Bartholomew – shit, I didn't even see him die. The Muggle aeroplane took off his head."

There was a hint of a raspy whistle from across the hallway. "That sucks."

"And... and when he died, leaving me alone... why did I deserve that? What had I done wrong?" Kemester paused, moving his ravaged hand around the outline of his face, his monstrous, ruined face. "And the thing is, if the Ministry had just waited a few minutes before sending the officials... hell, Dumbledore would have sorted things out. He would have. He would have sorted it all out, and none of this would have happened..."

His voice trailed off as he stared into the candle, the guttering little candle in his hand. He squinted slightly – was that his brother hiding in the tiny flame, just waiting for the right moment to speak or smile? Was he there... or was he just a name and a slowly blurring memory that he tried to rationalize everything he killed?

"You know, I've done some bad things," Kemester whispered, a warm moistness in his eyes making him blink quickly. "I lied... I abused Reed's trust... fuck, I treated him like shit, he was my fucking partner... and Potter... well, fuck, I tortured him! I tortured Harry Potter! I can hardly say that without recoiling – he was supposed to be the hero, and I tortured him on... on..."

His voice trailed off. Had it just been blind revenge? He knew there was a reason – hell, there had to have been a reason – he wouldn't have prosecuted this war just on vengeance?

Or had he?

Was it all a monstrous lie that he had chosen to believe? Everything he had done – was it all in vain? Instead of putting away Potter, he was the one scarred and mutilated – and sitting alone, in the bleakest prison on the planet. He didn't know how long he had been there, or how long he would have to stay.

His father was dying – would he have a chance to see him? To hear the old man explain why he had betrayed everything they had always believed? And Reed Larshall – a partner he had neglected, ignored, manipulated, and outright abused... would he see him? Would he have a chance to apologize, to explain why he had done... well, everything?

He was starting to see something now, in the flame. It was a man, with a few jagged scars across his face. He was plain-looking, with reddish hair and a wide smile. He always took after Mum, Kemester thought, closing his eyes against the memory. I was more like Dad – more serious, more business-like – yet we both cried at Mum's funeral, when we lost Dad to this nightmare... and now having lost him, I'm losing me...

"I don't know whether Potter is guilty or not," Kemester whispered, finally admitting the unspoken truth that he had been dreading for so long. "But even if he is, there was more to it than him – and more to it than me. It was never just us two... I just never treated it that way..."

He could see his brother nodding in the flame, his cherry-red hair dancing around his face like on a blustery fall day, where reminiscences are intended but never realized. And suddenly he could see Potter, blood trickling down his shattered nose, his arms sheathed in metal and spiked to the table in front of him, his eyes blackened and filled with acknowledgment...

He closed his eyes against the tide of accusing emotions, and exhaled.

When he opened his eyes, the flame was gone.

Scrimgeour folded his scarred hands and fixed the nervous Hit Wizard with a penetrating stare. "And you are sure?"

"As sure as I am of anything," Larshall replied, swallowing hard. "Sir, does that mean –"

"No."

"But you don't even know –"

"You want to know whether or not it is safe for us to inform our men that Lord Voldemort has indeed returned?" Scrimgeour asked with a scowl.

Larshall raised his hand with helplessness. "It makes sense –"

"Tell that to Fudge. He won't believe us."

"Well goddamn it, he should! All of the facts –"

"I'm sorry, when did you ever get the impression that Cornelius Oswald Fudge was running the Ministry of Magic based on facts?" Scrimgeour snapped, slamming his open palm down on the desk.

Larshall looked around the office unsteadily for a few seconds. "I hadn't considered that."

"Understandable," Scrimgeour said crisply, rising to his feet and crossing to his Secrecy Sensor. He prodded the antennae of the thing with the tip of his finger. "You'd like to believe that the office that runs our government believes more in facts than in perceptions, but there you have it. The question, though, is what to do about the attack."

"Malfoy warned –"

"I don't trust a word that bit of filth says," Scrimgeour spat. "After the banking fiasco, I'm not placing any money with Lucius Malfoy – it's bad enough he hasn't been killed yet. As for warning us away from reinforcing the prison...well, our action there depends on our beliefs regarding the size of the resurrected Voldemort's forces. If we believe he has an army of size and the Dementors under his control, it would be idiotic to send a large force. On the other hand, if Malfoy has exaggerated Voldemort's strength, our failure to send Aurors could result in a smaller force seizing Azkaban, which would be both stupid and embarrassing on our parts."

"We have to do something –"

"Agreed," Scrimgeour interrupted, "which is why I've been working for the past month on a third option."

Larshall's mouth fell open. "What – you knew?"

"Dumbledore personally informed the Ministry and specifically the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that sinister forces were moving to take Azkaban at Yuletide Eve months ago," Scrimgeour said crisply, moving to his filing cabinet and browsing briskly through the folders, pulling several stamped with a peculiar slate-grey crest out of the cabinet. "After a series of... 'events' gave me the evidence to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, I began planning for this eventuality, along with a few others in the Department of Mysteries."

"The Unspeakables know too?" Larshall asked, flabbergasted. "Doesn't this compromise our operational security? I mean, are they authorized to –"

"Not all the details, but they're smart," Scrimgeour said with irritation as he laid the folders out on his desk. "They knew it would be foolishness not to be prepared, so we have planned a third option, one for which you and your team will assist us."

Larshall swallowed hard. "Those are Azkaban folders – prisoner records –"

"Exactly," Scrimgeour said icily. "Now I've spoken with Bones, and she's agreed to give the Hit Wizards on your team access to these and look the other way when you stage the mission. The team will be small – five members in total, three Aurors, two Hit Wizards – and you will be leading this mission."

"Me?" Larshall asked, shocked to his core. "I don't think – I mean, it's not that I'm not qualified, but –"

"But right now you are the only person in this Ministry, outside of myself, to know Malfoy's role in this, or even that he is still alive," Scrimgeour growled, leaning over the desk and fixing Larshall with a golden-eyed stare. "That information cannot be leaked to the Ministry – the tenuous goblin treaty we have right now would implode in our hands and we'd have civil war. Remember – the reason we got our treaty and the makings of the new bank is because Malfoy was 'killed'. While it would destroy Fudge's career for this to be shattered, I'm not willing to sacrifice that many wizard and Muggle lives to become the Minister for Magic."

Larshall nodded uneasily. "So what is the mission? Who are all of these people?"

"Political prisoners, mostly, and a few with lighter sentences that don't deserve to die," Scrimgeour said quietly. "Your secondary mission will be to reinforce the standing garrison and the Warden at Azkaban, but your primary objectives are these prisoners. They must be freed and brought back to the Ministry for holding. Even though this place is still an active reconstruction project, the political ramifications of their deaths would be... unpleasant."

"What about the Death Eaters?"

Scrimgeour paused, and his eyes flashed. "The ones that are alive in Azkaban are powerful and very dangerous. Even I would have great difficulty bringing a witch like Bellatrix Lestrange down. Avoid them if you can, as well as Lord Voldemort... presuming he shows his face."

Larshall ran his hand along his jaw. "You know, if we do see him... a wizarding photograph would do wonderful things for proving to Fudge that he's actually back –"

"You'd never see it make print, Reed," Scrimgeour said, bitterness filling his voice. "In any case, once you have these people to one of the Auror outposts, we need to ensure that... elements of Azkaban don't fall into the wrong hands." He carefully reached into his desk.

"What are you implying?" Larshall asked suspiciously.

"I need you to use this," Scrimgeour said carefully, gingerly setting the object in his hands on the table, between the folders. Larshall bent to get a closer look. It was clockwork, made of intricate bronze gears and spinning hourglasses, but it was mostly hollow around the center, where it looked like a tiny droplet of yellow-white liquid was suspended.

Larshall frowned as he scrutinized the device. "What is this? What's that droplet?"

"It's a highly purified, super-concentrated droplet of Combustion Concoction, hot enough to vaporize stone," Scrimgeour said in a low voice. "It's suspended in a modified temporal field adapted from Time-Turner innovations. All you would need to do is insert this key," he added, sliding a tiny golden key across the desk, "and the Time-Turners would slow and stop, causing the droplet to fall and explode."

"Is this... safe?" Larshall asked worriedly. "It looks a bit fragile."

"It has been magically reinforced, but I wouldn't play Quidditch with it," Scrimgeour replied coolly. "Either way, it's the best thing that has come out of the Ministry attacks, and the notes that weren't destroyed in Experimental Charms proved invaluable."

"How powerful –"

"Calculations indicate that Azkaban will be less than smouldering rubble."

Larshall swallowed hard. "And you want me to place this... at the spire?"

"Where else?" Scrimgeour retorted impatiently.

"Sir, that spire is a relic of over five centuries –"

"And I'd rather have it destroyed than in the hands of Lord Voldemort," Scrimgeour interrupted, his voice a growl as he rose to his feet. "He's attacked Azkaban for it before – and now he actually has a shot at taking it."

Larshall took an uneasy breath before piling the folders in his arms, scanning the names as he stacked them. As he slipped the last one into his hands, he paused.

"We're missing a folder."

"Really?" Scrimgeour replied sarcastically, prodding the antennae of his Secrecy Sensor again, this time with his wand. "Do tell."

"Kemester, sir. The younger."

"He doesn't have a file," Scrimgeour said briskly.

"But he's –"

"Because officially," Scrimgeour snapped, glaring at Larshall, "he's not there."

"Sir, you and I both know that's bullshit," Larshall said bluntly, anger finally creeping into his voice. "We need to get him out –"

"You're willing to risk your life, your mission, and your squad to get him out?" Scrimgeour snarled, rounding on Larshall, his golden eyes blazing. "You think he's worth that much?"

"He was my partner, sir," Larshall returned angrily, "and damn it, that counts for something!"

"He treated you like garbage!"

"That's because he needs help!" Larshall said, amazement and frustration warring for dominance in his voice as he ignored the echo of Malfoy's words. He couldn't even believe this was an issue – yes, Dmitri Kemester had done some terrible things and had abused his power as a Hit Wizard, but he was in Azkaban for all of the wrong reasons! "The death of his brother shook him badly, and getting mutilated in his fight with Harry Potter only hurt him more. Either way, he doesn't deserve to rot in a cell for this!" Maybe for other things, but not this!

"And you're willing to risk it?" Scrimgeour asked incredulously.

Larshall didn't know what he could say, and he spent a few seconds struggling between half-formed ideas and words, beginning to move aimlessly through the office as he thought and Scrimgeour watched. Finally, he just shook his head.

"Sir, I'm the closest thing to a friend that he has, and like it or not, he is still a Hit Wizard – the Department should take care of its own," he said quietly, finally meeting Scrimgeour's eyes. "Especially now. We can't afford to lose any more."

Scrimgeour was silent for a long few seconds as he sat down on the other side of the desk. Finally, he picked up the explosive and held it out for Larshall to take.

"You have a mission, Hit Wizard – and I do not officially condone any rescue operation taken for Dmitri Kemester. But," he added, even as Larshall as about to protest, "I would appreciate debriefing Mr. Kemester myself – Madam Bones and I have a number of questions that he could readily answer."

Larshall nodded – that was the best he could hope for. "I'll set up in one of the private briefing room with Sanders – send your Aurors down at 1800 hours tomorrow – we'll move from there."

Scrimgeour stood up and extended a scarred hand, which Larshall very awkwardly shook while balancing the files and explosive in his other hand. "Good luck, Reed."

He could have said the unspoken words hovering over, but he chose not to, instead nodding and leaving the office. No need to state the obvious.

Good luck... we're going to need it.

Harry stared down at the heap of papers on the table, his expression filled with complete disbelief. How the hell... if this is all true –

"It hasn't accounted for all the factors," Cassane said, drawing a heavy breath as he rubbed his eyes, "but it accounts for... well, what we know."

"Which isn't enough," Sirius muttered, tossing his quill aside and falling back into his chair with exhaustion. "Wish you hadn't been comatose for so bloody long, Harry –"

"I didn't choose to be out of action for a month, Sirius," Harry snapped irritably as he picked up the bottle of Butterbeer that he had placed near the leg of his chair – there simply wasn't any room left on Aberforth's tiny table in the sitting room above the bar. "At least you two managed to find each other."

Sirius and Cassane exchanged glances. "Well, after everything you told me, I had some idea where to look," Cassane began fairly.

"Didn't stop me from making your life difficult until I felt you were trustworthy enough," Sirius said wryly.

"Either way, he's been valuable in at least getting an approximation to a solution to this nightmare," Cassane finished, rising to his feet and taking the bottle of scotch from Aberforth's tiny countertop. "Want any, Sirius?"

"Please," Sirius replied gratefully, letting Cassane refill his glass with a generous amount. "Let me tell you, Harry, this is damn good stuff, and I usually don't care much for this stuff –"

"Too uppity for you?" Cassane asked with a grin.

"It's the stuff my father and uncle used to drink, what do you think?" Sirius retorted with a snort. "Ponce is practically written on the damn bottle – save some for Tonks, will you, Nathan?"

Harry's face lit up, and he felt a warm feeling of anticipation rise in his stomach. "She's coming?"

"We're lucky we're seeing her at all tonight," Sirius replied heavily, taking a tiny sip of the scotch. "The Aurors and Hit Wizards have been working insane hours running protection for Ministry negotiators. The goblins are still misbehaving, and nobody would put it past them to strike – particularly the more radical elements. Even this close to Yule – hell, it's in less than two days –"

"And that means I have to be in London starting tomorrow," Cassane finished with a scowl. "The Minister's throwing a massive charity event for the diplomats returning to England, and he's planning a big speech about the strength of a 'rebuilding Ministry'. Most of it's a load of garbage, but –"

"The food will be good," Sirius said, taking another sip of his scotch.

"So you haven't seen Tonks at all, recently?" Harry asked with surprise. "What about Order meetings –"

Sirius snorted. "What Order meetings? We're overextended as it is, and the ones that aren't combing the country to find out what Voldemort's doing are working double overtime at the Ministry. I think I saw Kingsley at the end of November, and Tonks... shit, I remember seeing her just after I finally met up with you, Nathan –"

"December 3rd," Cassane said distractedly.

"Yeah," Sirius finished, setting his glass on the table and rubbing his eyes as he gestured at the heaps of paper on the desk. "Most of my time has been used puzzling out this damned simulamancy magic, and trying to find out how the spiritual attacks interfered with everything. And whenever Nathan's not running off to the Ministry –"

"Don't blame me, blame the job," Cassane muttered, moving to peer out the window.

"He's been helping you?" Harry guessed.

"As much as he can," Sirius said. He looked up at Cassane. "I don't remember working with you being this mentally exhausting before –"

"Sirius," Cassane interrupted, his voice abruptly icy.

"Cassane, I already know that Sirius was working for you – and so were my parents," Harry said exasperatedly. "Why don't you just tell me –"

"I don't remember most of it," Cassane said curtly, "and the things I do remember, I have no interest to talk about. You have the memories I gave you?"

"I haven't had a chance to view –"

"Then I'm not saying a word," Cassane said, his voice heavy with finality as he turned to fix Harry with a glare. "You need to know the context of everything... understand what it meant –"

"That's what Sirius told me last year before we talked about Crouch!" Harry exclaimed with frustration. "Sirius, back me up here –"

Sirius let out a heavy breath, and to Harry's shock, didn't meet his eyes. "Harry... in all fairness, what I do remember – and I don't remember much, probably for the better – I don't think is relevant here. Nathan's right, you need context before you start digging into what we did –"

"Shame any digging you're going to do is going to have to wait – Harry!"

Harry's eyes went wide, and before he had realized it, he had jumped to his feet and pulled Tonks into a tight embrace. Her hair, a long curly straw yellow, immediately went bright bubblegum pink as she laughed and hugged him.

"Merlin, I've missed you," she whispered huskily, and before Harry could say any more words, her left hand was slipping toward his waistband –

Cassane cleared his throat, but Harry couldn't detect any irritation in the noise. No, it sounded like a strange mix of distinct pride and something else...

"Oh, leave them be, you old coot," Sirius said with a smirk as he picked up his scotch glass. "I'm enjoying this –"

Tonks smiled, and broke the embrace. "We'll continue this later, but right now, Sirius is right – we've got a lot of work to do. Nathan, Sirius – I see you've been busy."

"And we actually have results," Sirius said with a wide smile, gesturing for her and Harry to take chairs. "Well, approximate results anyways –"

"Enough that we can effectively fend off the ghost attacks and cut their ties to the temporal distortion," Cassane interrupted, his eyes lighting with manic energy as he moved to the table and drew his wand. Tapping the parchments with a brisk flick, the massive equation erupted into the air, hovering above the papers and dripping gold sparks. "All we need is the deflection device – most of which I'd been working on already with my contacts in the Department of Mysteries – and we should be able to block the temporal decay from getting any worse and the spirits from hurting any more people."

"Will it do anything about Peeves?" Harry asked darkly as he sat down.

Cassane paused in mid-wand motion, and the floating, glowing equation dropped back into the papers as he thought. "I'm not sure, to be completely honest," he finally admitted. "Poltergeists are a different sort of creature entirely."

"Well, you should put those papers away," Tonks said grimly, pulling a heavy envelope from her robes and tossing it on the table. "We've got a more immediate problem right now."

Both Cassane and Sirius' faces hardened, and Harry blinked with confusion. "What's going –"

"I was waiting until Tonks got here to tell you this, Harry," Sirius began slowly, running a hand through his hair. "Tonks, you want some scotch?"

"You don't have any goblin rye?" Tonks asked with a disgusted expression. "Or at least some soda or something –"

"Nymphadora, this is the best damn scotch in England," Cassane said with a smirk. "Courtesy of –"

"Would you stop calling me Nymphadora?" Tonks interrupted heatedly.

Cassane raised his eyebrows and smiled as he passed her the glass. "Just drink it, my dear – and don't you think of cutting it with soda. This is the good stuff, courtesy of Rita Skeeter for my support of her article."

Tonks sighed as she accepted the glass. "Well, might as well drink now to something good," she said wearily, "considering none of us could be alive tomorrow to say it."

"Okay, what's going on?" Harry asked, his eyes widening.

Sirius exchanged a glance with Tonks, and then sighed. "Harry, I wasn't lying before when I said that the Order's overextended. It's bad, Harry – we might have had a head start before, but without some of

Dumbledore's shrewd ideas, we're several dozen steps back in reacting on time to Voldemort's actions."

"But one thing we all knew about was what Voldemort was planning for this Yule," Tonks said quietly. "Or really, I should say that Snape, Moody, and Kingsley all knew – I found out everything from Kingsley a week ago. All because of operational security reasons – the rest of the Order doesn't even know."

"But why wouldn't Dumbledore just tell the Order –"

"This mission was far too important," Sirius said heavily, looking down into his glass. "Or so Kingsley told me – we couldn't afford the risk that Voldemort knew that we had any clue of the details of his planned attack. He undoubtedly knows that we know about the attack itself and the timing – that information, Voldemort likely leaked himself – but he can't know that we might know any more."

"Attack... on what?" Harry asked, a chill filling his gut.

"Azkaban," Cassane muttered darkly. "He's going to get his best and let them loose."

"And worse," Sirius agreed sombrely. "He wants the Spire."

"Sorry?" Harry asked blankly

"The Spire, Harry, is where all of the wands of the Azkaban detainees are stored," Cassane explained quietly, his eyes going distant as if he were remembering something long ago. "It's a massive tower, over five hundred years old, and filled with tiny holes. The holes are slowly being filled by wands, and inside the tower, whatever magical essence inside those wands is slowly filling a membrane spanning the height of the tower, turning to the Spire into a gargantuan caricature of a wand itself."

Harry's mouth fell open. "That's... that's insane on so many levels."

"How do you think that the Warden of Azkaban is able to control all of those Dementors at once?" Sirius asked bitterly. "One Patronus

Charm from the Warden's chamber at the top of the tower, and the Dementors would be pushed past the stratosphere, if not annihilated entirely. It's a massive veiled threat, which the Warden uses to keep those fiends in line."

Harry frowned. "Hang on – if wands are drained of power when they're in this Spire, why does your wand still work, Sirius?"

"Harry, it would take almost a century for a wand to be drained of magical essence," Cassane explained. "I doubt that Sirius notices any difference at all."

"It does feel a little lighter..." Sirius mused.

"Oh shut up. The point is, Voldemort has always coveted the Spire, and made several raids on Azkaban to take it during the First War, yet he was always repulsed." Cassane let out a deep breath. "Unfortunately, the Ministry had a lot more manpower to spare during those years, and defence of Azkaban was a priority. And of course, it helped that Dumbledore had a vested interest in the Spire – or more specifically, its destruction."

"What?"

"It was strange, really," Cassane said, almost to himself, "because I remember as a young man out of Hogwarts listening to Dumbledore give a speech on it. He said it would always be a temptation for those seeking evil, and that 'a man's wand is always his own – it can be taken but must never be destroyed.' Harry, there is a reason that the Wand-Breaker Curse has been banned since the fall of Grindelwald, but Dumbledore always said that wasn't enough. He had been fighting to repeal the wand destruction for underage wizardry for decades, but the Ministry never really cared..."

"And nor did they try to get rid of the Spire," Tonks finished heavily. "Until now."

Sirius' eyes shot wide. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Scrimgeour signed off on it himself –"

"There's no way that they'd be willing to relinquish that kind of power –"

"Well, obviously Fudge doesn't know," Cassane said with a huff. "This has been Scrimgeour's plan from the start – he's as desperate as we are now. If Kingsley has chosen to alert Scrimgeour about the upcoming attack – and really, I can't see how else Scrimgeour would have found out – then he's in the same straits we are."

"Wait a second," Tonks interrupted suddenly. "Nathan, not to be rude, but how the hell do you know about this? I only found out three hours ago, and –"

"Use your brain, Miss Tonks," Cassane said tiredly. "I've had people in the Department of Mysteries for months – rest assured, I knew about the explosive device and the plan for it."

"So the Ministry is going to attempt to blow up this Spire?" Harry asked, his gaze darting from Cassane to Tonks.

"Try the entire fortress," Tonks muttered.

Sirius shot to his feet. "You're kidding me."

"Wish I was."

"Fuck, there are people in there that we –"

"Oh, don't worry, Sirius, Scrimgeour's got a list of political prisoners that we have to get out during the anarchy of the attack and spirit away before blowing the fortress," Tonks said bitterly. "It's a suicide mission."

"What about Sturgis Podmore?" Sirius demanded.

Tonks shook her head, and Sirius swore again.

"Why does that name sound familiar?" Harry asked with a frown.

"Because he was the man who reportedly murdered Laertes Rawling a few months ago and blamed it on Dumbledore," Tonks said coolly. "He's also a member of the Order – we need him out of prison, at least to get some answers."

Harry's eyes suddenly snapped wide open. "He's not the only one we need to get out."

All eyes turned to Harry, and a small grin crept across Cassane's face.

"Beg your pardon?" Sirius asked incredulously.

"Claudius Kemester," Harry said, clenching his hand into a fist. "He's one of the last two men alive who know all the details about the Potter Vaults – and we need that money if we're going to attempt simulamancy again –"

"Which you will need to do, at some point," Cassane interrupted, glancing at Tonks, who nodded quickly before turning back to Harry. "What was that all about..."

"Fine, then we get Claudius Kemester out too," Sirius said heavily, downing the last of his scotch in a single swig and earning a sharply disapproving glare from Cassane. "Fuck, I never wanted to go back to that place..."

He turned to Harry and swallowed hard. "Harry, I'm not going to ask you to come with us on this one –"

"I'm going," Harry said firmly, finishing the last of his Butterbeer and slamming the bottle on the table. "No questions."

"This isn't a good idea, Harry," Cassane said in a low voice. "This is a suicide mission."

"Maybe not, though," Tonks said suddenly, raising a finger as her hair shifted to fluorescent blue. "The main fights will be the guards fighting off the mobs of prisoners and Death Eaters, and whoever we

encounter inside the prison itself. Sirius and Harry could probably sneak in and out in the confusion and nobody would ever notice."

"And if Harry comes with me, we've got a better chance of finding the old judge," Sirius finished. He shuddered. "I never thought I'd go back to that place..."

Cassane stared at Sirius for a long few seconds before sighing and turning to Harry. "Then if you're set on this, Harry, I have some things you might appreciate. As would you, Sirius."

Sirius' mouth fell open. "You have... my old gear?"

"And James', and Lily's," Cassane said, closing his eyes. "I'd have to go through some old storage containers, but I could give you a few things, Harry. A wand-protector, some armour padding, your father's old Silver Arrow –"

"You have the Silver Arrow?" Sirius asked, his eyes lighting up with astonishment and unrestrained excitement.

"Isn't that just a broom?" Harry asked curiously.

Sirius shook his head, a wide childish smile on his face. "Harry, you haven't seen anything yet."

They talked for another few hours, until Sirius nearly fell asleep on the table in the middle of planning. Realizing that they weren't going to get much further without significant sleep, they agreed to begin fresh in the morning.

"Well, I guess I'll see you in the morning, Harry," Tonks said with a wink as she rose to her feet.

He didn't quite understand the feeling rising suddenly in his gut. Time seemed to pause, as Harry's mind raced. His heart pounded faster, as he thought about the words he desperately wanted to say, the risk he had wanted to take the second he had seen her walk through the door -

"You – you don't have to go, Tonks," Harry blurted.

Sirius snorted audibly, and while Cassane didn't make a sound, Harry thought he could see a hint of a smile on the older man's face. Harry felt blood rush to his face, but he took a deep breath to steady himself. I can do this – I took the first step, I just have to follow through... please say yes –

"I guess," Tonks said slowly, her smile slightly widening, "that I might be able to stay the night."

"Wait, where am I going to sleep?" Sirius asked indignantly.

"How about on the table, you were already nearly there five minutes ago!" Harry retorted, glaring at Sirius. "Aberforth will use his room, and Tonks... and Tonks and I will use the guest room. Just transform and use your basket like you did before – I thought you said you preferred sleeping like that anyways."

Sirius shrugged. "Just wanted to clarify."

"I'll go... freshen up, then, in the guest bathroom," Tonks said, giving Harry a sly smile. "Give me five minutes, and I'll be ready." She winked at Harry again, and before he could stammer a response, she had slipped into the guest room and closed the door.

Harry could hardly believe his luck.

There were a long few seconds of silence, and then Sirius looked at Harry, his expression unreadable. "You're going to be sleeping with Tonks, and she's my cousin."

Harry swallowed hard. "Uh... yeah."

Sirius raised his hand into the air and beamed at Harry with triumph. "And right now, I'm so proud of you! Up top!"

Even Cassane laughed as Harry gave Sirius the high five, his face burning with mortification all the while.

"Right, so you do know what you're doing, right?" Sirius asked, his business-like tone completely betrayed by the wide grin on his face. "You've had the talk, right?"

"I got it from Uncle Vernon with Dudley when I was ten," Harry said with a shudder. "My uncle thought I should know everything not to do so I wouldn't reproduce and plague him with a baby on the doorstep."

Sirius made a revolted noise. "Just thinking of him makes me not want to have sex, but that's besides the point – I guess I'll just have to do my godfather duties."

"Oh good lord," Cassane muttered.

Completely ignoring Cassane and Harry's amazed expression, Sirius began to speak. After roughly three minutes, Harry had heard quite enough.

"Thanks, Sirius, that should be good."

"I haven't even gotten to the good part yet!" Sirius exclaimed indignantly.

"He'll figure it out," Cassane said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "In any case, I'd like to speak with Harry for a few minutes."

Leaving Sirius slightly crestfallen, they stepped into Aberforth's empty room and Cassane shut the door.

"Even though I'm not as open as Sirius, I'm proud of you," Cassane said warmly, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder. The warm feeling in his gut welled up again, and he couldn't help a smile.

"Uh... thanks, I guess."

"You have something special with Miss Tonks there, I think," Cassane continued, his eyes strangely moistening. "Reminds me a bit... a bit of what I used to have with my wife, a long time ago."

Harry felt a bit of a lump forming in the back of his throat. "I'm sorry, Nathan – I really am."

"You know... once you lose someone like that... she's gone, forever, and you'll never replace her." Cassane took a great, shuddering breath as he continued, a strange note in his voice. "Harry, I'd do anything to bring her and my daughter back – my family. That kind of beauty... you can spend your whole life searching and never find it again. No matter what you do..."

He shook his head, and turned back to Harry. "You should go. Be careful, and keep in mind that what you're doing... well, you're making it clear who you can't afford to lose."

"I think Tonks know that," Harry said quietly, "and she's accepted it."

The smile returned to Cassane's face. "Yes, I know. Go ahead, then – you've earned this."

Harry nodded quickly and left the room, the back of his mind pondering the strange note in Cassane's voice – like he was trying to send a message to Harry, a cry for help...

He shook his head as he approached the door, taking a deep breath. I'm ready... it's time. I can do this.

He knocked twice.

"Come in."

He slid through the door and nearly gasped. Somehow, in the five minutes that he'd been gone, the room had changed. Candles were lit around the room, a breezy perfume hung in the air, and the sheets that had once been rumpled were now cleanly pressed.

And on those sheets, Tonks was lying on her side, a wry smile on her face and a black halter nightdress hanging off her shoulders. It was short, barely covering her buttocks, leaving Harry to admire her legs that were bouncing lightly off the bed. Her hair was long, curly, and

bright pink again, falling around her face in a way Harry guessed would take most girls hours of careful preening to achieve.

"You ready for me?" Tonks asked, and Harry felt a shiver run down his spine at the sultriness of her voice.

"God no," he replied honestly.

Tonks laughed, and Harry felt some of the pressure in his chest abruptly fade. "Good, because I hate holding this pose." Rolling clumsily to her feet, her hair getting shorter, she moved close to Harry and peeled away his robes with slow contained motions. His shirt and pants were gone seconds later – as was her nightdress, untied in Harry's shaking fingers.

"Are you nervous?" she asked, her smile never wavering as she pulled him towards the bed.

"Yeah," Harry whispered. "I want... you know, to do it right."

Tonks laughed again, and this time some of the wryness left her smile. "Let me show you, then." Taking his hand, she guided it around her, to the clasp of her straining bra. Then taking his other hand, she placed it gently just inside the front of her panties. Harry noted, with a degree of astonishment, that the panties were a little damp.

"And..."

He didn't have to say anymore, because Tonks pressed her lips to his, and all of his doubts and fear went straight out the window. He didn't care – he was with her, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Her bra clasp, after a few seconds of fumbling, fell open, and it was discarded on the side of the bed, which creaked under their weight as he fondled her breasts with the tips of his fingers. His other hand tugged away the fabric, and moved deeper, caressing and stroking. She shuddered a little, and then leaned close, her breath warm against his ear.

"That's the trick... let me return the favour."

They shifted on the bed, and she was on top, her hair tickling the inside of his legs as she began to lick. It was a feeling unlike any that he had felt before – and it was incredible. He felt his nerve endings rising, becoming more sensitive with every second as her tongue caressed him, pulling him up towards something, something amazing –

She pulled up, and before he could say another word, she had shifted her weight – and this time he felt a very different wetness pressed against him. She leaned close, her voice hot in his ear.

"Harry... I'm ready."

"I – I know. It's... it's time."

Author's Note - the longest chapter to date of this story, and also, in my opinion, probably one of the most epic. Warnings go up here for graphic violence - a lot of it. But as always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

It was over seven hundred years old, and since its construction, the sun had never graced its stones.

Some had called it a curse, created by the renegade witches and wizards fleeing England, incensed by their lack of recognition in the Magna Carta, a curse to hide them from the eyes of their 'treacherous' brethren and all Muggles. Some thought the curse was an after-effect of one of the nightmarish attempts by dozens of dark witches and wizards to take the fortress, a spell gone terribly wrong.

Others thought it was because of the Dementors that swarmed around the dilapidated and misshapen keep like flies around rotten meat. Whether or not the creatures had been created inside the fortress was only speculation – they certainly seemed to gravitate towards it, and the souls trapped inside.

Still others – others that few believed - thought it was something far more malignant altogether. They thought that somewhere – within the curtain walls of cells rebuilt time and time again, or within the twisted outcroppings of rock that were scattered about the darkened courtyard and filled with the worst of prisoners, or hidden in the depths of labyrinthine tunnels and sewers below, or even nestled inside the unnaturally tall smooth Spire that soared over the fortress like a hangman's gibbet on a hill – there was a gate to realms below. A gate to the blackest depths of Hell itself.

Nathaniel Charon, former Hit Wizard and Warden of Azkaban, knew the truth – or thought he did. It wasn't any curse, or the Dementors, or a mythical demonic gate. No, it was far simpler.

Every world needs a place where the sun or moon doesn't shine, he thought, staring across the fortress from his tiny balcony at the top of the spire, and this is ours.

It was a bleak view indeed. Dark, roiling clouds filled the sky like a smothering blanket, and even two hundred meters above the ground, the air felt cold and oppressively heavy. Far below his feet was the fortress – the craggy wall, the wretched jutting shelves of rock erupting from the central courtyard where the worst of the prisoners were kept, and the ancient courtyard where renegades executed hundreds with two simple words and a gesture of their wands.

His eyes moved beyond the walls of the fortress, and fixed upon the mountain. It was less of a true mountain, to be sure, for when the wizards tore the bedrock from the sea floor free to build Azkaban, the plate had cracked and puckered in response, forming a jagged ridge approaching the eastern wall.

Charon closed his pale blue eyes and clenched his right hand – his right arm lost long ago and replaced with a life-like metallic limb in an experimental operation – as he tightened his shoulders, bringing his cloak closer around him. He was a tall man, lined with wiry muscle, his face thin with a greying goatee, and his cloak didn't fit particularly well about his broad shoulders. The full cold of winter was upon them, and the sun had gone down hours ago as far as he could tell, but the Spire always glowed just bright enough to see beyond.

A particularly harsh gust of wind pulled at his cloak, so he pulled it tighter around himself as he stepped inside. Even in the circular room, it wasn't very warm. The pitiful fire in the grate had already guttered out, and one look at his tattered blankets on his bed told him he wasn't going to find any warmth there.

Drawing his wand, Charon lit the lamps along the walls and approached the center of the room, his steps stiff and erratic as he approached it.

He had an idea what it was – the Unspeakables had given him their theories. Coiling from the floor to the top of the high ceiling, it looked like nothing more than a muscle fibre made of sizzling, solidified magic itself. Created with the Spire three hundred years after Azkaban was first built, it was an enigma that men had killed for – and that he was using to warm his hands.

Charon couldn't help but shake his head at the sheer ludicrousness of it all. He didn't lust for any forbidden power here – he was just doing his job... until...

He knew it was coming, and that was why he didn't mind looking at the mountain to the east – at least he wouldn't have to look at what was outside the fortress to the west.

"I don't want to look at a graveyard," he whispered to himself.

"A shame, then, because you'll soon be joining them."

The curse streaked past the side of his head, but Charon didn't even stir. In fact, he sighed.

"A warning shot, Voldemort? Are you that confident?"

Out of the shadows surrounding the west balcony he appeared, just like Charon had been told that he eventually would. Tall, in unadorned black robes. Bald, red-slits for eyes, a snake-like face – and a strangely pensive expression.

"There is no need for confidence when one has certainty," Voldemort replied without emotion, raising his wand. "Confidence implies that there is an unknown that must be faced."

"And you already know all about me," Charon finished with a bitter chuckle, turning to face Voldemort with a cold smile on his face. "So why did you hold your strike?"

"Because questions need to be answered, Nathaniel," Voldemort replied softly, beginning to circle, his wand fixed on Charon. The Hit Wizard had already started moving, circling across the opposite side of the room from Voldemort. "I already know your history – a decorated Hit Wizard for forty years –"

"One could say that without your killing of my entire family," Charon interrupted, "I would have no notable history."

"A history you earned by attempting to thwart my plans, and by killing my Death Eaters," Voldemort said calmly. "How many, Nathaniel?"

Charon allowed himself a cold smile that showed teeth. "Eight. It would have been nine, but Mulciber surrendered."

"You were competent. I would salute that, but –"

"I did my job – I killed the murdering thugs that you sent after good people – and I didn't take any sick pleasure in putting those dogs down."

"There is no good, or evil," Voldemort said smoothly. "There is only power, and those too weak to seek it. But that doesn't matter now... you taught at Hogwarts for one year, a job I once desired."

"Dumbledore would never have let you teach," Charon whispered with a hot rush of fierce pleasure. "He knew the truth – like I do."

"You continued to serve until you resigned from the Ministry in August, in protest of the formation of the Hogwarts Analysis & Investigation Team," Voldemort continued as if he hadn't heard Charon, circling and twisting the wand slightly in his hand. "And then you chose to take the Warden position here – and here we are."

"So you had a question?" Charon growled.

"You've come to a place many would consider the worst in the world," Voldemort said softly, "and I want to know why."

"The job had to be done," Charon replied, just as calmly. He shrugged. "Besides, where else was I to go? No family, no job, no friends still alive, not much of a home... what else was I to do?"

For the first time, a thin, mirthless smile crossed Voldemort's face. "That answers my question."

"You ask a question, I reply with one," Charon said suddenly, his eyes lighting up.

"Oh?"

"Why are you here? The Spire, again, like every other dark wizard who has attacked this place in the past five hundred years?" Charon's voice was filled with scorn. "World dominance from the helm of Azkaban? And here the profile I had implied that you were more original."

"That's three questions," Voldemort said, his thin grin becoming slightly wider, "but this time you are wrong, Nathaniel – you see, the Spire is of limited use to me. After all, if it is like a wand... wands must be able to move, Nathaniel. The Spire cannot move unless I rip Azkaban from its foundations, and considering the energy required to make such a move – well, it wouldn't make much sense, you see. A poor 'superweapon' indeed."

"Then we have nothing more to discuss," Charon said, throttling back his urge to swallow hard – he wasn't afraid. It was his time.

He inclined his head in a short bow, and despite himself, he felt an instant of gratification to see Voldemort do the same.

Thirty seconds later, the room was in ruins, the balcony was gone, and Nathaniel Charon was dead.

"Come, Nagini."

The massive snake slid next to Voldemort, hungrily staring at the corpse smouldering in the corner of the room.

"Not today, Nagini – today you are meant for something more. Counterclockwise around the fibre, as we prepared."

The snake obliged, moving carefully across the stone, winding herself in a wide circle around the fibre of magic. Then, with ferocity, Nagini bit down on her tail, her venomous fangs sinking into her own flesh, and Voldemort smiled.

It was perfect.

With a wave of his wand, the room was blanketed in colours. Sweeping arcs of magic reinforcing the room, a layer of powerful enchantments covering every inch of his skin, and a circle of poisonous black light filling Nagini. He could see the fibre thrashing madly inside the circle, but he had given a piece of himself to the snake – and the magic bound within it was perfectly formed, ready for his wand.

He lowered his wand and touched the edge of that circle. Immediately, the snake rose into the air, a floating ouroboros – a perfect fusion of geometry, mortality, and divinity.

Voldemort respected the first, had no respect for the second... but the last intrigued him greatly. But that would be a matter for a few months – after all, the plan was going splendidly.

He tapped Nagini, now sheathed in pure blackness, and nudged her. The snake began to rotate counterclockwise around the seething magical fibre – growing even more vibrant and volatile with each rotation. It bespoke magic untamed and primal, never once cast from the shaft of a wand – until now. Bound by a soul fragment and dozens of constraining enchantments placed upon the snake, it formed the perfect circle he needed – for now.

Voldemort spared a glance out the window. The fortress was silent – but not for long. He murmured a few words and cast the spells to steady himself and preserve his eyes – for while he was careful and his calculations were sound, he was quite certain no other wizard had gotten this far before.

A jet of quicksilver erupted from his wand and sheathed Nagini from head to tail, and Voldemort nodded with satisfaction – she would be preserved, and the circle would remain effective.

It was time.

"MORSMORDRE!"

The spell split the sky, and guard commander and Auror Rick Moreson nearly lost his balance as Azkaban shook.

It was a green comet, erupting from the tip of the spire, streaking into the air like a Muggle rocket. The concussive force blasted the clouds back, and moonlight fell upon Azkaban for the first time in centuries. The crescent moon hung high in the sky, appearing afraid of the blast surging from the Spire.

Then the comet exploded in mid-air.

Moreson shielded his eyes as he peered upwards. New clouds erupted into the sky – clouds brightly lit by poisonous green lightning that could kill anything it touched. Each cloud was swollen with rain and hail, and proceeded to erupt over the fortress – except the rain was not water, but emerald-burning tongues of liquid, and the hail was blacked and wreathed in fire.

"Run, damn it!" Moreson roared. "Get under cover, RUN!"

The Aurors and Hit Wizards standing watch scrambled for cover from their positions on the walls and security posts as the fortress was bombarded – but not everyone made it. Moreson could only scream helplessly as he saw his men exploding into green flames or crushed beneath hailstones a foot across – none of them realizing that the casting had shattered the massive Anti-Apparition Jinx that had hung over the fortress for decades, renewed by Dumbledore himself after Grindelwald had attacked Azkaban over fifty years earlier.

The moon hung petrified over the gargantuan Dark Mark exploding across the sky, but strangely, through the one of the eye sockets of the cloudy skull, it could still be seen.

Just as it had been planned.

The second spell was not like the first. There was no explosion or shattering of clouds, just a massive vertical cone of cold white light, erupting from the top of the Spire and cutting through the Dark Mark. The cone grew massive as it soared higher and higher – until just over a second later, when it touched the moon.

The beam had been meticulously timed, calculated, and angled by one of the greatest geniuses of the magical world – timed just long enough for the moon to appear full to those in Azkaban far below.

And even though Fenrir Greyback's pack of werewolves landing on the southern edge of the island couldn't see the moon through the cone of light, the reflection was still there – and it was enough.

Almost as one they moaned, collapsed to their knees on the rocks – and transformed before the unbelieving eyes of the Aurors and Hit Wizards on the walls above them. Even through the thunder of the storm, they could hear the howling below them as the light disappeared from the top of the Spire – it had done its job.

A few began to cry softly as they gazed out from their cover, a few others began to recite half-remembered prayers to a god they never believed in – Hell had come to the damned fortress, and the horde of slaving demons was at the gates.

Moreson screamed orders from the wall, shouting for his men to take positions and defend, but only a few dared to run – while the deluge of flame and hail was beginning to slow, nobody wanted to take the risk. Even the pack of werewolves moved cautiously towards the wall, with a hesitation that belied human intelligence.

The few Aurors and Hit Wizards who did manage to take positions wasted no time. A flurry of curses erupted from their wands, and the werewolves below scattered as they advanced towards the wall. A few fell dead – nobody was taking any chances.

But Moreson continued shouting between launching Patronus after Patronus into the air, calling for reinforcements to his superiors at the Ministry, but drawing up a happy memory against the rain of fire and werewolf howls was difficult, and most of the magic failed to coalesce into a corporeal shape. But he refused to give up – he couldn't.

At least until he chanced a glance to the north – and saw a flight of broom-riding black-cloaked figures descending from the sky, wearing masks and casting horrific curses as they descended. Without the

brooms, they could have been mistaken for Dementors – none of which, the commander noticed with astonishment, had attacked.

To Moreson, a veteran of the First War, Dementors would have been preferable to Death Eaters.

The rain of fire and hail had nearly stopped, but green fires that seemed to consume stone had sprung up across the fortress – and the downpour had forced the Hit Wizards and Aurors dangerously out of position, with the werewolves and Death Eaters outflanking them.

But despite all of it, Moreson was undaunted. He was a veteran, and he had worked at Azkaban for almost a decade. He had faced Dementors and Death Eaters, and while he was apprehensive, he didn't dare show any fear. He owed his men that much.

"Take positions!" he shouted, his wand pressed to the tip of his throat to amplify his voice. "Defend the walls – don't let those rat-bastards get inside! Aerial division, get in the air and make sure those Death Eaters don't overrun – "

He couldn't continue – a stray curse peppered him with rock and dust. Ignoring the pain of a half-dozen cuts across his arm, he kept shouting. "Make those bastards pay! Bring them down, bring them down-"

He continued to shout – he felt his vocal cords strain – but no sound emerged from his mouth. In fact, he couldn't hear a damn thing – not the howl of the winds or the howl of werewolves. It was as if the world had gone silent for a few seconds...

He felt a touch on his shoulder. He looked quickly to see Parker, a new Hit Wizard recently assigned to Azkaban – and who was pointing at the Spire with a trembling, clammy hand.

Moreson felt bile rise in his gut – something was wrong, something had gone terribly wrong, where were their reinforcements –

It sounded like nothing less than a flock of a thousand angry birds surging into the sky.

Suddenly, he could hear again. He squinted towards the tower – it looked like it was raining something around the tower, spraying over the entire fortress...

"Sir, what is..."

But then he realized that droplets didn't look that dark against the softly glowing Spire. Or were that large. Or looked like nothing more than quills of a porcupine being shed.

"My god."

"Sir!"

Moreson nearly didn't have the heart to tell Parker. It was a nightmare, it had to be – it was his worst nightmare, come to life. The one thing that he hadn't drilled his men on, because he never thought it would happen.

"They have their wands," he whispered numbly, barely able to hear his own voice above the howls.

"Sir?"

He swallowed hard. "Parker, Azkaban has been breached. The prisoners have been freed. We can't let them flee."

Whatever meagre blood was in Parker's face was gone. "Sir... we can't stand against all of them."

"We're the advance guard, Parker," Moreson said, his eyes flinty as he gripped the young man's shoulder. "We can't let these bastards leave."

"What... w-what is the plan, sir?"

Moreson fixed the small group of Hit Wizards and Aurors around him with a steely glare. There were about twenty-five of them, and he

knew that he maybe had a hundred men left alive around the fortress – and some were not combatants.

There were over five hundred convicts in Azkaban – and they all had wands now.

"Those of you who wish to stay, guard the wall for as long as you can against the wolves. The rest... make your peace with whatever you hold dear." He reached into his boot and pulled a second wand free, holding it loosely in his left hand. Most wizards weren't ambidextrous, but right now, he'd take any advantage he could.

"We kill everything in our path."

Voldemort carefully stepped away from the raging column of energy in the center of the room, a small smile on his pale face as he surveyed his handiwork.

The spell had worked. In a masterstroke, he had forcibly expelled every wand inside the spire and sent them homing to their owners – that is, every wand with an owner in Azkaban. It had been a devilishly tricky spell to design, but he had completed it. Better yet, the protections around Nagini had held – the snake and the valuable magic inside it were intact.

"Now the next stage," he said to himself, beginning to raise his wand.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that."

He wasn't alone.

Voldemort did not need to turn – not yet. The complex mesh of enchantments he had spent a day crafting around himself allowed him to see the man without turning. The man was big, dark-skinned, and wore the robes of an Auror.

He recognized him instantly.

"So you've come to interrupt my work," Voldemort said softly, not yet turning. The man was an interruption, but one he had expected – and

could afford to handle. "A bold move, but you know you have no chance against Lord Voldemort."

"I'll take my chances," the Auror growled, his voice barely audible above a whisper. His voice was not deeply calming anymore, but filled with the dangerous edge that was only produced by sheer fury.

Voldemort was amused – the Auror had a spine, and a lot of nerve to dare approaching him near the pinnacle of his power.

He turned this time, facing his new opponent and fixing him with a carefully constructed expression of disdain. "Not even Dumbledore dared to attack me – what gives you that authority?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt raised his wand, his face contorted with righteous wrath. "My position, as an Auror of the Wizengamot, and the law behind it. And by that authority, Lord Voldemort, **YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!**"

The walls of Azkaban were notorious for only having one main entrance – the massive, iron gate on the southern wall. The reasons were simple – nobody would approach Azkaban from the frigid open seas of the north, and the massive ridge to the east coming up nearly to the keep's wall made an entrance useless.

That left the west – but there was a very simple reason why nobody approached Azkaban from the west.

The graveyard.

The rocky ground surrounding the island had always been too rough for anything but shallow graves, and the constant flooding kept the forsaken spit of land soaked and grimy. The stench of half-rotted corpses filled the air – the Dementors never bothered to bury the bodies very deeply, and the tombstones (which only lasted a few months against the waves and the storm) were barely nubs, providing little shelter for attackers against the forbidding wall of the fortress.

It was the perfect place for the strike team to hide.

Tonks pulled her scarf tighter against her face – she had sprayed it heavily with perfume to attempt to cover up the stench, but it wasn't doing much and shielded her face from the rain as she ducked to where Wilson, Larshall, and Sanders were crouching in a tiny culvert against the wall. She made sure that her gaze did not linger on Wilson – she couldn't let anything slip that she knew his little secret...

"Right, let's go over this one last time before running into hell," Larshall said tersely. "We can't go over the wall without alerting everyone that we're here, so we go under it."

"That's your plan?" Wilson asked incredulously, pausing from pulling his wand free. "Reed, these walls go a few dozen feet underground too, there's no way in hell we're tunnelling through!"

Tonks, however, immediately got the idea. "The sewers."

"Right. There are two drains along this wall. They're locked from the inside – easy enough to blow through with the right spell –"

"And then we get lost in the Azkaban sewer system, which was designed to be a maze!" Wilson exclaimed. "Damn it, Reed, this is –"

"If you'd let me finish, I wasn't suggesting we stay down there!" Larshall retorted. "Once we're in the pipes, we get just far enough to blow our way into the outer cells – the ones built into the walls. Most of the prisoners we need are in there. Once we find them, we give them the Portkeys and move on. Once we get everyone, we rendezvous in the execution courtyard and charge the Spire – odds are, we're going to have to fight for it."

"And the prisoners that aren't on our lists?" Tonks said in a low voice.

Larshall let out a slow breath. "Hostiles we take down. Non-hostiles... well, they aren't the Ministry's problem. If they've got a Death Eater tattoo, kill them – we can't afford mercy here."

Tonks nodded and forced herself not to look at Wilson. Now when I'm forced to kill you, I can just say I was following orders. But despite

that, she knew she had to say something. "That's pretty callous, Larshall –"

"Tonks, I don't like this either, but I don't have a choice here," Larshall said tensely, running a hand over his scalp nervously. "Without Shackbolt here, we're undermanned, but hopefully he'll have the Spire taken for us by the time we get there, so we can plant the explosive and get the hell out. Understand?"

They all nodded. They all knew their missions – and they all knew there were long odds against all of them getting out alive. Not that I'm helping that statistic, Tonks thought, but still...

"We go in teams of two?" Wilson asked curtly.

"You and Tonks take the far drain, Sanders and I will take the near one," Larshall said, pulling his own scarf around his face – the sewers were going to smell even worse than the graveyard had. "Good luck, you two – I'd be nice for both of you to get out alive."

They reached the first rusting grate with little trouble, and Sanders blew it apart with a single Reductor Curse. He snorted under his breath.

"It shouldn't be this easy to break into Azkaban."

"I only know about these drains because Scrimgeour told me – apparently they're heavily classified. Besides, nobody wants to break into this godforsaken place – and if they did, they wouldn't want to go through the hell of these sewers." Larshall leaned towards the open grating and immediately felt a rush of cold clamminess even through his thick robes and cloak. "And, as I expected, it's flooded with Dementors. Son of a bitch."

"They had to go somewhere –"

"Then you produce the Patronus, because I'm not sure I can make one by any stretch right now!" Larshall snapped.

"Go into Azkaban without being able to produce a Patronus?" Sanders scoffed, but a glare from Larshall made him sigh and send a flash of something silvery zooming down the grate. "That should take care of the ones in our way."

"One more thing before we dive headfirst into this," Larshall said, moving close to Sanders and slowly drawing his wand, "something that I didn't want to say with the Aurors around – we've got another prisoner to get."

Sanders tried and failed miserably at looking innocent. "I don't know what you're –"

"Damn it, Sanders, we don't have fucking time for you to be stupid! We need to get Kemester out!"

"Umbridge had a damn good reason for putting him in here –"

"So you openly admit you're taking orders from her over your own damn office –"

"She pays a hell of a lot better than the Department ever did!" Sanders snarled, pushing Larshall back. He kept his wand lowered, but Larshall was wary. "And she offered me something Bones never did –"

"And Umbridge isn't here," Larshall growled, stepping closer, his eyes burning with disgust. "She'd never be here – but Bones would, if she had a choice that wouldn't destroy her career. She'd fight."

"Kemester belongs in prison, he's a lunatic –"

"And he's a Hit Wizard and my partner, and if that bond doesn't count for something, we've got nothing left," Larshall finished, shoving Sanders aside as he carefully stepped onto the ladder into the grate. "I've got orders to get him out – orders from our Department, not a woman who is doing her very best to make everyone else's life hell for her benefit."

"Assuming he's still alive when we find him," Sanders spat.

Larshall gave a bitter smile as he started descending. "Oh, he's alive. Men like him don't go down without a fight."

The rattling was what woke Kemester first.

It sounded like someone was banging on thin wooden doors with a dozen sticks, the cracking and tapping echoing bizarrely down the stone hall toward his cell. He slowly slid upwards from his stiff mattress and peered through the dark...

"It's not as cold," he whispered, slowly rising to his feet – ducking down a second later as a painfully placed stalactite hit him just above the eye. Rubbing his forehead, he squinted out through the bars. "Where are the Dementors..."

"Gone, I think," the voice across the hall called out, the rasp almost sing-song and sending a small chill down Kemester's spine. "Think Christmas might have come early..."

The rattle was growing louder. Kemester carefully stepped closer to the bars, striking one of the tiny matches for even the slightest bit of light...

Something slid through the bottom of the bars, and nudged his foot. Instinctively, he looked down –

It was his wand.

His mind screamed that it was impossible, that he was somehow dreaming, but when he bent and picked it up, there was no denying the feeling of warmth rushing into his fingers, no denying the smooth familiar grain of the wood...

His hand was stiff, but the motions came back to him instinctively.

"Reducto! REDUCTO!"

The first curse bent the bars – the second broke them. He could hear the harsh squeal of snapping hinges, of creaking metal. The rush of

excitement was inevitable, and he kicked the cell door with all of the adrenaline he could muster...

It hit the stone floor with a crash, and he was through.

He was free.

"And here I thought I'd be the first one out."

His gaze snapped to the man now emerging from the cell opposite his, pulling tattered robes around his shoulders to fit through the perfectly square hole that had been sliced through the bars with his still-glowing wand

The man ran a hand through his long hair and shoved it away from his face, revealing a thin beard and mustache around a square chin and even mouth. Azkaban had sunk lines into his face and hunched his stature, but Kemester could see the remains of powerful shoulders and a muscled chest through the ruined robes.

But there was something about the man's face that drew Kemester's eyes. It wasn't the man's glinting stare, but something about his face... it was swarthy, to be sure, but there was something else about it that seemed vaguely familiar...

The man straightened and immediately pointed his glowing wand at Kemester. "Sweet Merlin's testicles, you're an ugly man."

"Forgive me, the healers didn't consider me a priority," Kemester snapped, pointing his own wand at the other man. "Tony, right?"

"It's good enough."

"Give me one good reason not to kill you right now."

"Two people are better than one, and do you really think whatever monsters have set upon this godforsaken rock will distinguish between any of us?" Tony replied with a shrug. "We get out, we never have to see each other again, and we go about our lives. Plus, you

need a guide to get out of here – I have a rough idea where we are, and I might be able to get us out."

The corridor around them trembled slightly, and Kemester's eyes narrowed.

"Better make your decision soon, I'm not waiting around forever," Tony said calmly, pulling up his wand and lightly twirling it around his finger.

"We'd need to get to the Spire first," Kemester said through clenched teeth, thinking fast.

"That's suicidal, so no."

"Azkaban records are stored there – I need to find answers about who put me here, and why. I need the truth."

Tony paused, and looked like he was considering Kemester's words. A strange expression had crossed his face at the word 'truth', and Kemester suddenly remembered Peeves' cryptic words...

... And once you get settled in, make sure to ask for a friend of mine – you'll know him when you see him. Terrific guy, great conversationalist, amazing with the truth...

Tony finally gave a shrug just as the hallway shook again, peppering them both with dust. "Might as well. You have no problem killing, Hit Wizard?"

"Do you?"

The first trace of a smile crossed Tony's face, and a strange light grew in his eyes. "You see, I'm a practical man, Kemester. If it gets in my way, it won't need to worry about anything. Like breathing."

He got his first glimpses of the fortress when he reached the very top of the eastern ridge, and he had nearly fallen backwards with shock and barely-contained fear.

And he was going in there. He, Harry Potter, was about to storm Azkaban.

"Are you ready?"

Harry wasn't ready. He didn't feel the slightest thing close to ready. When the Spire had exploded with magical power, he had nearly made the decision to get on the old modified Silver Arrow in his hands and fly straight back to Hogsmeade.

But he had come this far – and if there was a chance he could find the truth, something that led to answers, he wasn't going to pass that up.

He nodded slowly to Sirius, his second simulacrum's long dark hair falling limply over his face. While he had crept out of Hogwarts through the Honeydukes tunnel in his original body, he and Tonks had privately agreed that it was likely best to go into Azkaban in a more 'disposable' form. And although neither of them wanted to admit it or even speak of it aloud, the strangely overloaded spells that he could cast in his second simulacrum would likely be very useful inside the battleground of the fortress.

Sirius shook his hair back and stared at Azkaban, lit with raging fires, lightning, and the ominously glowing Spire, a haunted look on his face. "I don't want to be here, Harry. I can still remember..."

"I know," Harry whispered, his voice hardly audible against the sounds of the storm and fighting far below. "Are you ready?"

Sirius took a deep breath – and then spat out across the abyss below them, a confident look on his face. "If I'm coming back here, I'm going to leave one hell of a mess! Got your happy memory?"

Despite the nightmarish setting and muffled screams below, Harry nevertheless smiled as he remembered the warmth of Tonks in his arms, the fluttering in his stomach as they kissed, the wild feeling of being inside her...

"Oh yeah," he whispered. "I've got it."

"Then let's raise some holy hell!" Sirius roared, pumping his fist in the air as he descended to his outcropping. There, newly polished and gleaming in the light of the fires and moon, was Sirius' motorbike. It was massive – Sirius mentioned that it was a 'Triumph X-75 Hurricane', whatever that meant – and was studded with spikes and thin strips of blackened metal covering the vulnerable engine.

Complete with the leather motorcycle jacket, the long hair, and the outstretched wand, Sirius looked everything like the cover of the loudest, angriest rock album that a wizard never made. He gunned the engine of the bike, and gave Harry a thumbs-up.

It was time.

Harry took a deep breath and stepped to the very edge, pulling his hood over his head. He acutely could feel the edges of the enchanted plating that he was wearing around his forearms, chest, and thighs – plating that Cassane had told him had once been his mother's.

It felt strange, not quite right, for him to be wearing his mother's plate guards, but right now, he'd take any protection he could get. Gripping his father's Silver Arrow tightly, he stared out, scanning the fortress for the broken tower of rock that Sirius had told him would house Claudius Kemester.

My mum's 'armor', my dad's broom... it's almost like I'm taking up their fight, their mantle... whatever that was...

He squinted, and suddenly he could see it through the smoke.

"I got it!"

Sirius nodded, and with a single whoop, he hammered on the gas. Without warning, the motorbike leapt forward – right off of the precipice.

Harry began counting down from five as he tightened his grip on his wand and broom. Five... four... three...

And then he noticed. A matte black sky, only a fading moon and dim flashes of lightning illuminating it. Fires of every colour illuminating the breached fortress. And screams splitting the air, some the animal howls of werewolves, but most human. The majority were human.

He had seen this before.

The feeling of déjà vu hit him like a sledgehammer, but he refused to acknowledge it. The mission was too important, he knew he couldn't afford to wait, afford to reconsider where this might take him –

Two... one... NOW!

And with a short exhale, Harry leapt off of the precipice.

The smoky air rushed through his hair and up his nose, tearing at his hood and stinging his eyes, but he didn't look away. It was almost like a suicidal Wronski Feint, but with the added flair of fire, flying curses, and Death Eaters...

He curled his legs in, and wrenching his broom downwards, he forced the bottoms of his feet to touch it...

The effect was instantaneous. The enchantments on the broom wrenched his feet into position and he let the rest of his body follow suit. He let go with his left hand – only to snag the black tethering hook erupting from the broom's shaft in his fingers. Then, with all his might, Harry pulled.

His perspective shifted sickeningly, and he felt his gut churn as the broom was yanked horizontal – and not a moment too soon. Pulling out of the dive and holding onto the tether rope for dear life, Harry let the enchantment work its magic, and he stood.

It had been one of his father's most insane ideas. James Potter knew that he was a great flyer, and that it was a massive advantage in combat, but most of the best protective enchantments only worked if one touched the enchanted object as little as possible to avoid disturbing the magic. It also didn't help that holding onto a broom

limited one's ability to cast more complicated spells with larger wand movements, and James wanted to fix that.

So he improvised.

What came out was a heavily modified and enchanted Silver Arrow, with a retractable tether cord and two flattened sections for one's feet. Enchanted with every enhancing spell and protective charm that his fiancée could find and with a built-in full Shield Charm for the 'rider', James had created something all together new and completely unique – not to mention barely legal.

But the best modification was a spell that Cassane said Dumbledore crafted himself: an 'inertial compensation charm'. With it, the rider could choose to ignore, bleed away, or even harness the forces tearing at him as he performed any number of daredevil tricks, even allowing him to roll the broom and continue to fly and fight without gravity ripping him free.

Harry felt the broom thrum with magic beneath his feet, and even with the aid of the numerous balance charms and tether rope, he quickly adjusted his balance. He had spent the entire afternoon (the morning had been occupied with more 'recreational' activities) practicing with the device, and while slower than the Firebolt, it was the most incredible broom Harry had ever flown. It felt more like a Muggle skateboard Dudley had once owned – except it could fly.

Crouching slightly, he couldn't hold back a vicious smile. Sirius was right – it was time to raise some holy hell.

Carefully angling his wand, he dove into the fray.

Parker was the fourth man to die.

The werewolves had broken through the gate, and had stampeded into the courtyard. It had nearly been the death of them until a quick-thinking Hit Wizard had split the unstable ground between them and the horde with a Fissuring Curse. It didn't save Clark and Bendile from the werewolves leaping across the new chasm and tearing out

their throats – before the monsters could be disembowelled by a flurry of curses.

But Moreson knew they couldn't stop moving – the Death Eaters above them could strafe the group, cutting them to ribbons. He screamed for the guards to keep moving, but it was too late – Worson had taken a Blasting Curse that had blown his scalp into pieces. Moreson had replied in kind with a lash of flame that had nearly split the Death Eater's broom in half, but it wasn't enough – not nearly enough.

"Light fires along the path!" he roared, cursing another Death Eater clean out of the air as he began moving across the splintering terrain. "Hem them in so we can take more of them – look out!"

He dove for cover as one of his best Aurors, a strapping brute of a man named Rocel, sent a wave of pure force from his wand, blasting away a half-dozen werewolves that had been charging the flank. Even from his distance, Moreson could hear bones breaking like wet branches.

"That's six –"

"Seven –"

"And about a thousand more to go!" Moreson roared. "KEEP MOVING!"

They broke into a run, fire and lightning spewing from their wands as they charged across the courtyard of Azkaban. A few other Aurors joined their pack – along a few prisoners attempting to strike from within. Those men were cut down without a second word.

"Towards the south-western pinnacle!" Moreson screamed, pointing wildly with his wand as his heart hammered. With an incoherent roar, the guards charged, the werewolves crossing the fissure in hot pursuit –

The first volley of curses nearly cut the entire company down. If it hadn't been from Parker's hasty and shockingly powerful Shield

Charm, the wave of spells from the south-western pinnacle – one of the three hewn spires of rock where the worst criminals and Death Eaters were kept – the entire group could have been dead.

"Cover the rear!" Moreson hollered, as he scrambled for any sort of cover against the spells. But the courtyard was mostly open and free of debris – giving them no cover.

But Parker was full of surprises. Clenching his teeth and completely ignoring the spray of blood from a nosebleed he had given himself with the last spell, he pointed his wand at the ground and yanked.

The ground cracked, shook beneath their feet, and Moreson could only watch and parry a line of spells with amazement as Parker pulled a shelf of rock a few meters across and a meter high free of the ground, yanking it upwards, giving them some cover at least from the hailstorm of magic –

The next curse took off Parker's head.

Moreson could only watch in astonishment and rage as the young man's body fell, blood exploding from the stump as it crumpled. The man had performed tremendous magic, saving their lives, and now this?

Dodging three Killing Curses with reckless abandon, he leapt over the cover to confront the killer –

It was a single man, his hair wild and untamed, fanning a pockmarked face with a horrid smile. A single Death Eater, but one of the worst.

Augustus Rookwood. Former Unspeakable of the Department of Mysteries.

The traitor.

Moreson didn't hesitate. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The Death Eater nimbly dodged and bared his teeth. "You'll have to do better than that, Moreson!"

Moreson wiped a smear of Parker's warm blood off his face. "That's why brought friends – KILL HIM!"

The guards roared their assent, leaping over the cover, wands spraying fire and force with abandon. It wasn't just a charge – a few Hit Wizards took cover, and began precisely picking off werewolves attacking their rear with silvery jets of magic.

Rookwood only smiled. "I did too," he proclaimed, raising his wand high. "GO!"

They erupted from the south-western spire like maggots out of meat. Thin, barely alive, their eyes all hungry as they leapt from the windows, landing disturbingly lightly on the stone. All were baring wands.

Moreson's face hardened as he took aim – nothing like picking off the cancerous rot –

And then the howl split the air.

It was like that of a wolf, but so much worse. Deeper, more bestial, sounding less like a dog and more like a demon. It came from the creature at the top of the wall – no, not the top, it was leaping –

The hastily fired Killing Curses missed, and the gigantic werewolf seized the nearest Hit Wizard – and bit down, his mouth stretching obscenely wide. More bones crunched, and the headless corpse of the Hit Wizard was tossed aside like an empty can.

Its muzzle was slick with blood, running in rivulets down its chest – and it was holding a wand in its grotesquely twisted hands.

Fenrir Greyback had entered Azkaban.

"Fresh... meat. Cook them, Augustus."

"My pleasure."

"But how am I supposed to –"

"Just take the Portkey and go!" Tonks exclaimed, pushing the small rock into the disbelieving man's hand and shoving him away, leaving him to evaporate into nothingness as he was yanked out of Azkaban.

"Tonks, duck!"

She dove behind the shattered remains of the cell door, and the curses streaked past. Wilson fired a trio of spells Tonks didn't recognize, turning the prisoners who had been pursuing them into wet mist.

"Think that's all of them chasing us?" he shouted as Tonks carefully stepped into the hall.

Tonks didn't answer – taking cover behind a boulder, she picked off the straggler of the group, nailing him with a Bludgeoning Curse to the neck before he could raise his wand.

"Now that's all of them," she said, breathing heavily and wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead.

Their trip in the sewer had lasted all of ten minutes – Tonks' Patronus had easily been able to fend off the Dementors as Wilson tunnelled up into the thick walls of the fortress – where most of the lower-security prisoners had been kept in well-constructed cells.

In other words, most of their targets.

They had managed to free four of them and spirit them out before being spotted by the first killers. From there, it had been a running battle.

Most of their targets had already been killed, but there were a few that had hidden, cowering in their cells hoping to be rescued – likely the safest option, even if they had their wands back. Predatory mobs were roaming the halls, killing and looting everything in their path, and it had only been blind luck that had kept Tonks and Wilson from avoiding the worst of them as they freed the prisoners.

"Now we make for the Spire," Wilson exhaled, cautiously looking around before stepping out of cover.

"Not yet, we've got one more person on my list," Tonks replied, lowering her wand as she clumsily moved over the wrecked stonework towards the stairs.

"Wait a second, I don't have the name –"

"Maybe Larshall forgot to write it on your list, I don't know," Tonks snapped, moving quickly down the stairs and snapping off a quick Stunning Spell to the first person she saw, nailing him in the face and dropping him like a sack of potatoes. "All I know is that we've got to get him out of here."

Wilson blew out a long breath, but stepped in behind Tonks. "Fine, where is this guy?"

"Far north wall, second sublevel."

"We actually got a prisoner in an underground cell?" Wilson asked incredulously. "Those are medium-security –"

"And apparently somebody wants him out!" Tonks snarled. "Look, we can't stand around and argue, let's move!"

"All right, all right!" Wilson replied heatedly, running along behind Tonks as they ran down the stairs that lead towards the sublevels. They could both hear the screams ahead of them and the gleeful howls of bloodthirsty lunatics wreaking havoc.

Tonks braced her jaw, and her hair shortened and turned a matte navy shade. Wilson only gave a tight little smile, as if he was anticipating the charge.

Bloodthirsty... more proof if I didn't already know that you're a Death Eater... and once I get Sturgis out of here, nobody will even notice when I kill you myself.

The battle was horrifyingly one-sided, and both combatants knew it.

But much to Voldemort's annoyance, Kingsley Shacklebolt wasn't about to give up without a fight.

His first dozen curses, Voldemort deflected effortlessly, his motions graceful and relaxed as he followed his shielding charms with a simple conjuration –an inch-thick, magic-proof cylinder of glass around himself and the magical thread his snake orbited.

He turned away from the cylinder and focused on Nagini. After quickly verifying the magic within the snake's coil was still contained, he raised his wand and began to chant. Around him, the Spire shook as another pulse of magic was fired into the sky – a pulse that spread like a massive shimmering golden umbrella around the entire island, which would prevent any reinforcements from arriving – at least any that wanted their bodies alive when they got there –

CRACK.

Voldemort frowned slightly as the glass around him exploded, peppering him with shards that sizzled away when they came within an inch of his skin, and he raised his wand as he turned to deflect the man-sized boulder Shacklebolt had magically propelled at him.

"That," he said softly, "was uncouth."

A twirl of his wand sent the boulder flying back towards Shacklebolt, who barely got out of the way to fire a Killing Curse straight at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord did not flinch – he grinned. Quickly sketching a square in mid-air with his wand, he watched the curse rush towards him –

And vanish.

Shacklebolt's eyes went wide. "What the –"

But Voldemort wasn't finished. Twisting his hand, he propelled the 'square' straight at Shackbolt, homing in like a targeted projectile. The Auror managed to dodge, and the square hit the wall – and went through it like it wasn't even there.

"Like the spell?" Voldemort said with a hint of a grin as he continued to guide the square on the other side of the wall back towards Shackbolt. "A little window I developed – straight into that exact point in space, ten minutes ago. And since the planet rotates so quickly, nobody will even notice the spells and objects passing through and falling into the open sea."

Flicking his wand upwards, he brought the square streaking forward – and yet Shackbolt barely managed to evade it. His cloak was partially caught in the edge – and was shorn clean off.

Voldemort could see Shackbolt racking his brain as he dodged a flurry of simple curses the Dark Lord cast as he manipulated his square for another attack on the Auror –

Who Disapparated, and shot another two Killing Curses at Voldemort's exposed back.

But somehow the 'window' was already there, swallowing the curses and hungrily streaking towards Shackbolt –

"PARIETIS!"

The shockwave forced Voldemort to take a short step backwards, but it had blown Shackbolt clean off of the Spire. But a quick mid-air Apparition brought him back inside, panting heavily and wiping blood from his nose.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "Not many people can bend a Force Shield Charm – a peculiar tactic to disrupt the window, I must remember that. An interesting hypothesis indeed – though it nearly killed you to test it."

"But it didn't," Shacklebolt hissed, snapping to his feet and spraying another four curses at Voldemort with surprising dexterity – none of them connecting with the Dark Lord.

Voldemort sighed. "You are vastly outclassed, Shacklebolt – you do realize that this encounter will only result in your death."

"You haven't won yet," Shacklebolt spat. "Avada Kedavra!"

With a flick of his wand, Voldemort conjured a stream of magic that solidified into a heavy golden shield before exploding on contact with the curse. But even as Shacklebolt shielded himself from the flaming shards, Voldemort snapped his wand into the air...

And in an instant, everything seemed to go quiet. The air around them began to tremor... and then pulse, beginning to flow in deep waves towards the Dark Lord, as if he was sucking the world towards him. Shacklebolt planted his feet, but Voldemort could tell with satisfaction as the air thickened around him that the Auror didn't know what was happening.

A shame. Voldemort would have appreciated the added fear.

Lowering his wand, he touched the cushion of thickened air surrounding him and the magical coil, and watched the spiral wave filling the top of the Spire grow stronger...

"Incendio."

The super-compressed air exploded with heat, and Voldemort watched as the moving spiral wave of air ignited, trapping the Auror between walls of flame, forcing him to run along the outside of the spiral still pulsing inward –

Voldemort bowed his head, and gracefully clapped his hands.

The flaming spiral waves of ignited air exploded outwards, blowing through the stone walls of the Spire like so much butter before a hot knife. Voldemort quickly charmed the ceiling not to cave in or break apart above him, but as the flames vanished, he smiled.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was gone.

Harry ignored the explosion far above him – he had to keep flying behind Sirius, keep moving as he darted within the flock of enraged Death Eaters, cursing as many as he could.

He could feel the overloaded spells explode from his wand, which vibrated up his arm with each casting. Most of his curses and jinxes as he dodged and twirled, but the few that hit were gruesomely effective. Bludgeoning Curses broke brooms into shards of hot wood. Freezing Charms froze the hands of Death Eaters to their brooms, often forcing them into suicidal dives. Whips of flame, while rarely hitting, simply tore the brooms in half and their riders with them.

Sirius had adopted a more direct approach – he just charged, and let the chain-wrapped and Engorged snow tires of the motorcycle do the rest.

Harry crouched slightly and readjusted his footing as he dropped into a dive. He felt his stomach fluttering, but he hadn't forgotten the mission. They had to find –

And there it was. The jagged northern spire, a blackened and seared spit of rock, most of it aflame, where the worst of criminals and Death Eaters had been kept.

Where his godfather had been kept. And where Claudius Kemester was being kept.

"SIRIUS!"

His godfather didn't need telling twice. Killing the Levitation Charm on the bike abruptly – and dodging five curses for the trouble, Sirius plummeted out of the sky in a dizzying arc, only pulling out at the last second to land on a large guard balcony on the northern spire – a balcony far too short to accommodate the speed Sirius was flying –

Harry wordlessly screamed, but with a squeal of brakes that even Harry fifty feet in the air could hear, the Triumph slid sideways and skidded – straight into the wall.

There was no explosion, and Harry ducked into a suicidal dive for the balcony, seeing Sirius crumpled on the stone... a dive he didn't know if the Silver Arrow could pull out of –

It was over in an instant. He felt his hand tear free of the tow robe, and he rolled across the broken stone, his robes ripping painfully as he tumbled.

But somehow, he was alive.

He scrambled to his feet, only to see Sirius also standing – and cursing a low-flying Death Eater clean out of the air. Harry looked around wildly for his broom, but then he saw it lying on the stones, and Sirius kick it over by the bike – which seemed miraculously undamaged –

"Come on, inside!" Sirius shouted, pushing Harry through the doorway and slamming it shut behind them with a resounding bang.

The sudden near-silence, in contrast to the insane rush of air past his head and whistling of curses, was deafening.

"Well," Sirius said, "that was close."

But Harry had already pulled his godfather into a tight embrace. "Damn it, Sirius –"

"No time for this, Harry, the story why I'm alive and my Triumph is untouched is one for later," Sirius replied hastily, drawing his wand and lighting it with a muttered word. "Suffice to say, I tend to set the damn thing down a little harder than I should, and, well, Lily was really good with Cushioning Charms."

"You scared the shit out of me, I thought you were dead!"

Sirius smirked. "I'll let you try it sometime. Now let's find Claudius Kemester before someone else does."

When they entered the sublevels of the northern Azkaban wall, the fight was already over.

"Bloody... bloody fucking hell," Wilson whispered in awe as he climbed over the debris – from the looks of things, the brawl had been prematurely and violently ended by the collapse of most of the ceiling. The iron stench of blood filled the chill, humid air, and Tonks tightened the scarf around her face instinctively. "You think your man is even still alive?"

"I have to check," Tonks replied, carefully avoiding stepping on the corpses as she eyed the cells. "He wouldn't be one to fight... or if he did, he'd fight defensively."

Wilson made a noise of contempt. "Those kinds of fighters won't make it out of here alive."

As much as he's probably right, I'm not going to give him that credit. "Nevertheless, his cell should be just up..."

Her voice trailed off as she peered into Podmore's cell – a cell piled with half-dismembered corpses. No fewer than eight dead bodies were stacked in the room, and the walls were painted liberally with spattered gore.

She felt bile rising in her stomach at the sight, but then she paused – nobody would stack bodies like this, unless...

"Nobody's here, let's go," Wilson said impatiently. "We shouldn't linger."

"No, he's here," Tonks replied softly, stepping around the corpse pile and nudging the bodies with her foot, carefully looking for the one she knew was not dead at all...

She bent behind the pile, just out of Wilson's line of sight. "Sturgis? It's Tonks."

A bloody hand sticking out of the pile twitched, and before Tonks' eyes, Sturgis Podmore began pulling himself from the bottom of the pile, his unruly hair matted with filth.

"T-Tonks? What are you –"

"Getting you out of here, come on," she whispered, grabbing his forearm and yanking him free. They both began to rise to their feet –

"Huh," Wilson said with a huff, "I guess I was –"

"Death Eater!"

Tonks stepped back, but then she saw that Sturgis had already drawn his wand –

And was pointing it at Wilson

Son of a bitch.

Wilson's wand was already up, but his Shield Charm barely deflected Sturgis' hasty jinx. Tonks fumbled for her wand –

"STUPEFY!"

Sturgis collapsed, and Tonks snapped her wand up to Wilson – who was now pointing his wand at her.

"Tonks, let's not be hasty –"

"Glisseo!"

Wilson sidestepped the spell, and Disapparated with a crack. Tonks swore under her breath as she quickly cast a Disillusionment Charm on herself and ducked low, the bastard could be anywhere... she needed cover...

The cell door exploded in a shower of sparks, and Tonks yanked herself back inside, cursing silently under her breath. Wilson was a

trained Auror, and he was good – and that meant he would be working to destroy her cover –

The wall beside her exploded into rubble, and she stumbled out into the main hall, shielding her eyes as she crossed the hall towards the next cell –

"Incarcerous!"

The ropes missed her ankles, but she still stumbled. Turning, she didn't see Wilson hiding, but she knew he was there somewhere – and that he knew where she was –

"Stupe-"

"Protego!"

Her Shield Charm barely held, and she swore under her breath as she Disapparated, reappearing in a cell a few meters down the hall, giving her some fresh cover from Wilson's attacks.

"Trying to take me alive, Wilson?" she shouted, keeping still as she eyed the hallway.

"I only asked the Dark Lord for one thing," Wilson replied back, his voice echoing down the hall, "and that was for you."

"And you didn't have the balls to ask me out, so it comes to this?" Tonks retorted, forcing a laugh. "I've got a book for you, Wilson – you can read it in a Ministry cell."

A volley of curses hit a nearby wall, but Tonks ignored them, Disapparating in the noise to a new cell on the other side of the hall.

"The Ministry will be giving me commendations," Wilson said loudly, and Tonks could hear his boots crunching on stone. "Because I was able to pull your violated body from the rubble and save your life before the man took the last thing that was dear to you – your life. And it was a shame your mind was destroyed in the encounter..."

Tonks clenched her teeth, refusing to let herself get provoked. He's goading me.

"I hear, though, there's a very special ward in St. Mungo's for those people, though – and I know the Healers would love to run a few 'restorative experiments' on one of the last Metamorphmagi left in this world..."

Tonks' hair went a brilliant red, and despite herself, she knew her eyes had changed colour as well. She fought to control her rage – she was not a magical creature to be studied, she was not 'the perfect whore' to be abused, and she was a better Auror than this slime ever dared to be –

"That is, of course, if you don't take the easy route and give yourself to me willingly."

She snapped.

She broke the Disillusionment Charm and leapt into the main corridor, diving and rolling from boulder to boulder as Wilson began to attack –

"Atrum chain LEVITAS!"

The lightning erupted from her wand, blasting stone and flesh as it carved its way down the hall, even as Wilson Disapparated again –

"Incarcerous!"

This time, the ropes snagged her ankles, and she fell spectacularly. Even as the black cords snaked up her body, she kept fighting, keeping her arms free even as the ropes were constricting her every move –

"Expelliarmus!"

And just like that, her wand was gone. She watched as Wilson snagged it out of the air, a triumphant grin on his face as he watched the robes finally truss Tonks' wrists.

"Gotcha."

"How much further?" Harry wheezed, putting a hand to the stitch in his side as he and Sirius paused to breathe.

Sirius wiped a trickle of sweat from his face. "It shouldn't be much further – hell, we're nearly at the top –"

"Do you think we missed –"

"We checked every single cell, and we haven't seen him," Sirius said tersely, giving his wand an experimental twirl as they began to ascend the cracking and broken stairs again. "And unless he was below where we landed – and frankly, I don't think he was, because when I... when I was in this spire, I didn't see him when I escaped. And that means up."

"But why here?" Harry gasped, as he jogged along next to Sirius, shoving his simulacrum's tangled hair away from his eyes. "You said the worst of the Death Eaters were in here – why the hell did the Ministry put Kemester Senior in here, of all places?"

"Damned if I know, Harry – I just know they brought him in here – I remember seeing that – and that according to Tonks, he's still alive," Sirius breathed, pausing at the next landing and carefully scanning adjacent cells. And like all the other cells they had seen, they were completely empty. "What I'm more concerned about is why we haven't run into anyone yet – there were some nasty people in this spire."

"Maybe they're with Voldemort –"

"I sure as hell hope for Kingsley's sake they're not," Sirius said fervently. "Okay, three more flights and then we reach the top, and there are only three cells up there. He's either up there, or below the balcony and we're royally fucked. Get your wand out."

"You think he won't come quietly?" Harry whispered, pulling his wand free.

"Not that," Sirius muttered. "Just promise me one thing?"

Harry winced at the sound of a gurgling scream split the air, but he nodded.

"If I say run, get your ass out. We're dealing with the worst of the worst here, Harry, and even if your simulacrum can take a Killing Curse, I'd rather not test it."

They made it up the last three stairs and approached the landing with both wands drawn. All the cell doors were open.

But unlike the other cells, one was still occupied.

"Sirius, here!"

They rushed into the cell, to behold a emaciated, shaking old man. His skin hung over his wasted muscles, as if he had been a much bigger man years earlier, and his coughs shook his whole body.

But Harry recognized the craggy face and shock of orange hair, now mostly grey-white. The son's the splitting image of the father...

Sirius was at his side in a second. "Harry, keep watch on the corridor - Claudius Kemester, can you hear me?" He shook the old man's shoulders. "Judge?"

The man's eyes snapped open, pale blue and wide with terror. "They said... they said you escaped."

"Everyone's escaping now, Judge," Sirius said bitterly. "Now come on, I need to get you out of here."

But the old man shoved Sirius back. "I have nothing to say to Lord Volde-"

"I'm not one of his, Kemester, and if you had given me a trial, you would have known that!" Sirius snarled angrily. "I'm here to rescue you, because we need some answers about the Potter vaults, and you're the only one who can give them to me!"

Claudius Kemester's eyes snapped wide. "You... you're telling me that... they aren't covering it up? T-That after all these years, we'll finally have justice?"

"I dunno about that," Sirius whispered. "But we need to get you out of here – can you walk?"

The man weakly shook his head, and Sirius swore.

"Sirius, we need to get moving before we get pinned down," Harry said tightly, keeping his wand angled at the doorway.

"Right... Harry, you're going to need to carry the good Judge here – don't look at me like that, I'm better trained to handle whatever we might run into –"

"Okay, fine, let's just –"

The explosion caught them all off-guard. Harry was thrown sideways against the wall, and Sirius pulled a stunned Kemester against himself so that the man's brittle bones wouldn't shatter. Harry shielded his face from the expected shower of hot stone –

But it didn't come. Cautiously opening his eyes, he moved towards the newest hole in the wall and peered downwards, into the courtyard...

"Sirius?"

"What?" Sirius snapped with irritation as he tried to pull the old judge to his feet.

Harry swallowed hard. "You'll want to see this."

They were cornered.

They were surrounded.

And they knew there was no way out.

Wands were up at all sides, as the last five Hit Wizards and Aurors stood, backs straight, against the tightening circle of slaving werewolves and gaunt Death Eater escapees. From all sides, they heard discordant howls, chill shrieks of pleasure, and incessant taunting. Rookwood and Greyback were lurking in the crowd, visible only for seconds before descending back into the mob. And above them, the Death Eaters circled like vultures.

Moreson wiped a trickle of blood from the horizontal gash that had split his forehead in two, and raised his wand in his one good arm. He wasn't going to cower, and he wasn't going to surrender. Not to this slime, not to these subhuman wretches.

"Sir?" Cara Yendyl, the single Hit Witch left in the group, spoke first, spitting blood and broken teeth with every word. "Orders?"

"I gave you our orders when we went in, Cara," Moreson whispered. "And they haven't changed. I recommend for your sake you don't get taken alive."

Cara blinked twice, then set her jaw and gave Moreson a nod. "I understand, sir."

Moreson gave a look to his other men. Burt Rocel, the beefy Auror that had killed at least thirty werewolves in their desperate charge. David Urne, a black hard-scrabble Hit Wizard maintaining the best Shield Charms that Moreson had ever seen. And there was another man, a dark-haired Hit Wizard that, to his surprise, he didn't recognize.

"You," Moreson called, keeping his voice strong and clear. "What's your name, wizard?"

"Gartens," the man called back, not turning, but keeping his gaze fixed upon the mob surrounding them. "Roy Gartens, sir."

"Tell me something about yourself, Gartens," Moreson shouted hoarsely. "What are you fighting for?"

"My wife," Gartens replied, his voice shaking. "My baby girl."

Moreson took a deep shuddering breath against the sudden tide of emotion in his gut. "Gartens, what's your baby girl's name?"

"Rachel, sir," Gartens replied. Taking his eyes away from their attackers for a second, Moreson could see the man blinking back tears.

He wanted to rage at the unfairness of it all. He wanted to scream and curse the monsters that killed so many of his men. He wanted to curse Fate and any gods that might exist in this cold, dank, howling world.

But he knew he couldn't. He was the leader – and he knew what he had to do.

"Urne, on a five count, drop the Shield Charms."

Urne nodded. "Starting count, sir. Five... four..."

"The rest of our world might not remember what we do tonight..." Moreson whispered, "but that doesn't matter."

"Three... two..."

"Because we're doing it for what we hold dear... and for that, we're heroes."

"One!"

"ATTACK!"

The Shield Charms dropped, and twenty-five seconds later, Rick Moreson and the last of the Azkaban Guard were dead.

"Merlin," Sirius whispered, choking back emotion in his voice as he turned away from the massacre. "Come on, we've got to go –"

"Right," Harry said, swallowing hard and pulling Claudius Kemester against him so that the old man could walk. "They'll be coming here next."

They began to move as quickly as the old judge's legs could handle, scrambling down the stairs dangerously fast as Sirius kept a white-knuckled grip on his wand, prepared to strike the second he saw movement.

They made it down the first six flights before they heard the sound. It was shrill, mocking, sadistic...

It was laughter.

Sirius' face went white. "Son of a bitch."

"What?" Harry asked, unable to help the panic creeping into his voice.

"Get Kemester on your back, we're running now," Sirius said quickly, giving the old man a hurried boost as Harry struggled to balance the new weight as they charged down the stairs, descending faster and faster until they could see the landing. For a second, Harry felt a rush of hope – the laughter was growing louder, but it was still echoing. Maybe they wouldn't have to see –

They reached the landing – and they were not alone.

A solitary woman stood in their way, blocking the stairs. Her robes were tight, revealing and threadbare – the type conjured rather than purchased. She was strikingly beautiful, even despite Azkaban's ravages – and her heavy-hooded eyes were lit with mad triumph.

Harry realized with a jolt that he remembered this woman – she had been in the courtroom with Barty Crouch Jr. – she had tortured Neville's parents – and from the delighted look of her face, he guessed she had enjoyed every minute of it.

"Harry," Sirius said, his voice shaking slightly – which sent a fresh pang of fear down Harry's spine, "remember when I told you to run?"

"Yeah..."

"This is Bellatrix Lestrange – and this is why."

"She's..."

"Oh, cousin!" the woman suddenly shrieked delightedly, raising her wand in the air. "You came back to visit – I'm sure you've enjoyed your time away, but it's always nice for the family to come home –"

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The ropes continued to constrict around her, but Tonks would not stop thrashing, not even for a second. She wriggled viciously, trying to tear her hands free from the cords that bound them –

"Why don't you just sit – FUCK!"

She had recoiled instantly, swinging her bound wrists around to slash at Wilson's face with her fingernails. She hit him just under the eyes, but it wasn't enough – his backhand sent her reeling on the stone. Stars flew in her vision, but she blinked as quickly as she could to clear her head, trying to roll away...

And then he was on top of her, his knee on her back, hand seizing the scruff of her robes, his wand at her throat, glowing with the dim red of a glowing ember. "I really don't want to make this difficult –"

Tonks twisted beneath him and tried to kick a sensitive area, but the blow only glanced off the plating that all Aurors wore. Wilson only smirked.

And then his wand came down.

The pain erupted across her neck as if he had slashed it. She couldn't even scream, the wand was digging towards her vocal cords, and tears were blinding her vision.

And then it stopped. Wilson pulled the wand away, leaving her choking and thrashing beneath him, the ropes taking advantage of

her weakness to tighten even further around her arms and sneak towards her throat...

"That was... unpleasant," Wilson said with a disappointed nod, "so I think I should calm you down. Imperio."

It was like getting hit over the head with a saucepan. The bang resonated in her ears, but there was no loss of control, no warm dreamy feelings... it didn't work –

And the Death Eater knew it. His eyes narrowing, he lowered his glowing wand towards her breasts, her ropes splitting open at its approach –

Desperately, she twisted her bound hands in front of her...

And the wand split the rope in half.

Tonks wasted no time. Her punch connected under Wilson's jaw, slamming his teeth together with a sickening clack. As he fell backwards, she rolled and dragged herself towards her wand, hoping to get there before Wilson recovered –

CRUNCH.

FUCK! OH MY GOD, FUCK!

"Like that, Tonks?" Wilson said with a vicious smile, watching as she writhed in pain, her left hand a shattered mess from the heel of his metal-shod boot. For spite, he kicked out again, this time connecting with her side. She heard something crack, and fought back tears from the onslaught of pain – but Wilson only seemed to be taking pleasure in her agony. "This could have been a lot easier on you – you could have just let me take you, like the rest of your kind –"

The ropes began moving faster now, rebinding her hands (causing her to scream in agony as the cords tightened around her snapped wrist) and wrapping sinuously around her throat, lashing her limbs together in a vicious hogtie. She gasped painfully, struggling to yank

her arms free, but every move she made the cords around her neck tighten a little more...

"Now," Wilson said calmly, a mad look in his eyes igniting as his wand began to glow again and descend towards her torn robes and slowly exposing her chest, "where were we –"

She knew she only had one shot at escaping now, and had to take it... she wasn't going to go out like this.

She screwed up her face, and changed.

Her muscle mass bled away, and she felt herself shrinking, the ropes around her body loosening as she transformed –

And that was all she needed.

She tore her hands free, and a cry of utter agony escaped her throat as her broken wrist and hand brushed the ropes, but she shoved away the pain as she grabbed the biggest piece of broken stone she could find. Unsurprisingly, it was already bloody.

Fighting desperately to ignore the pain erupting through her arm as she fought to transform back into her 'adult' form, she rammed the debris piece into Wilson's nose.

The blood splattered her face, and he finally fell off of her, but she wasn't going to let him get away – no, this bastard was going to pay...

Wilson tried to rise, but Tonks leapt on him with all the strength she could muster in her trussed legs, slamming the rock into his face again.

This time she could hear breaking teeth.

His wand fell from his hands as she hit him a third time – but his hands were moving towards her throat and beginning to squeeze...

She felt her air flow being cut off, and the creeping edge of blackness around her vision, but painfully twisting the rock in her hand, she brought particularly jagged edge down...

Right onto Wilson's left eye socket.

His grip broke instantly as his eye caved in with a gush of hot red blood. Tears and blood ran unchecked down his face as he howled in agony – now he was the one writhing beneath her –

The wand!

Tonks saw Wilson struggling for it, but she was a little quicker. Swiping it in her uninjured hand, she split the ropes still binding and constricting her with a slash, and finally struggled to her feet, Wilson thrashing madly, his face a horrifying mess.

She had stopped caring about proper procedure for dealing with scum like Wilson now, and she didn't even try to control her rage. No, this bastard had broken her hand and tried to rape her – she was under no obligations to show any mercy.

"Accio wand."

Her own wand leapt to her fingertips. Taking Wilson's in hand, she snapped it in half. Then, Vanishing his armor around his groin, she angled the wand pieces and muttered a Banishing Charm.

The pieces shot through the clothing, and penetrated. Wilson's single eye went wide with utter agony as the pieces bisected his organ –

"YOU LIKE THAT?" Tonks screamed, her restraint gone as she fought back the pain just so she could stay standing. "YOU LIKE THAT? INCENDIO!"

She smelt burning flesh, and Wilson's screams went an octave higher.

She only looked down, her eyes utterly dispassionate, her hair now jet black, her eyes completely green.

"Silencio."

Turning on her heel, she walked away, almost in a daze from the pain, leaving Wilson to burn alone in the darkness.

With a blindingly fast slash of her wand, a dozen thick boulders of debris blocked the Killing Curse even as Bellatrix gracefully sidestepped. Harry could only watch in utter amazement and growing terror – he had never seen somebody move that quickly...

She pursed her full lips and gave Sirius a disappointed smile. "Tsk, tsk, baby cousin – you and your little girl aren't getting away that easily –"

Before Harry could even move, waves of white-hot pain knocked him flat on his stomach. He couldn't breathe, his lungs were on fire, he was going to die in agony –

"NO!"

The pain suddenly stopped, and Bellatrix lifted the curse to deflect a flurry of furious spells from Sirius. Her eyes narrowed slightly, and before Sirius knew it, she had begun tossing curses of her own-

He felt Kemester tugging on the back of his robes, and Harry struggled to his feet, his wand up – but a second later, he was flat on his back, trying to clear the ringing pain in his head – he hadn't even seen Bellatrix turn to attack him, much less cast a spell!

But Sirius was moving closer, his face twisted in a grimace as fought for every step. Sparks sprayed from his wand as he cast spell after spell, forcing her away from the door to the balcony and back towards the stairs –

Harry didn't waste his chance. Grabbing Kemester, he ran towards the balcony –

"Not so fast –"

And before he even knew it, he was hit by the Cruciatus Curse again, collapsing against the doors as the pain filled every single cell in his body like acid...

"Harry, NO!"

The pain stopped, and blinking back tears, Harry saw Sirius running, smashing Bellatrix's impossibly quick shield –

And punching her with all his might in the face.

There was an ear-shattering scream, and Harry could only watch with dumb-founded amazement as Sirius was bodily hurled across the room by Bellatrix's next spell, his clothes smouldering. He struggled to get up, but then he started to scream...

Harry knew he only had an instant. Snapping up his wand and focusing every ounce of raw hatred he had towards the impossibly powerful woman who was torturing his godfather, he screamed the incantation.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

But somehow four corpses erupted out of thin air, and took the curse in full, igniting from the force of the spell, but it had been enough. Sirius was on his feet and running, tearing through Bellatrix's hasty charms and protective enchantments with brutal slashes, forcing her back towards the top of the stairs leading down into the rest of the spire. Harry began throwing every curse he knew, but somehow, the fiendish witch kept blocking everything he threw –

"TAKE THIS!"

Her gaze snapped to Sirius, and her wand rose, but Sirius' foot was already moving.

CRACK

And like a rag doll, Bellatrix toppled down the stairs and out of sight, driven with impossibly force by Sirius' kick to the breastbone.

Holy shit.

"Enervate."

Sturgis Podmore's eyes snapped open, and he shook his head wildly as he pushed himself to a sitting position. "Death Eater –"

"Yeah, I already knew that," Tonks said tightly, giving Sturgis a tap with her wand.

"And what, exactly, were you planning on doing about it?" Sturgis demanded, his eyes wide.

"Killing him quietly so I wouldn't have to go through a mess like I just did," Tonks muttered, unsteadily balancing in her crouch and wiping a smear of blood away from her mouth with her wand hand as she held out the mangled mess of her other hand. "Now shut up and start casting whatever Healing Charms you know before I pass out."

"Merlin, what the hell –"

"Wilson decided to use my hand like a Muggle football," Tonks whispered, closing her eyes against the rush of pain. "Sturgis, you know more about Healing Charms than I do – one of the main reasons you're useless in a fight –"

"Hey –"

"So start casting them please!"

"Fine, fine," Sturgis muttered, pointing his wand at her bloody, misshapen hand. "Let's see... pone ossa –"

"FUCK!"

There was a sickening crunching noise that brought bile to Tonks' mouth, but a second later, the pain was muted as the bones in her hand set themselves and fused the broken pieces back together.

"I wouldn't use that hand for anything," Sturgis said cautiously, pulling Tonks to her feet, "but at least the pain won't kill you. Still looks terrible, but you probably don't care too much about that."

"Yeah," Tonks panted. "Now take your Portkey and get out of here. Meet at Aberforth's, Headquarters has been cut off –"

"What? How bad have things –"

"Sturgis, I don't have time to explain," Tonks replied quickly, gingerly trying to avoid shifting in a way that would make her cracked ribs hurt her anymore. "And unless you think you're good enough to repair cracked ribs without causing me to pass out –"

"Tonks, if you have internal bleeding, you can't just –"

"Sturgis, take the Portkey and go," Tonks snapped, her patience quickly running thin. "You're not a fighter, and I don't want your death on my hands. Besides, you've got things to answer for – namely why the hell I'm breaking you out of here in the first place!"

"I was –"

"Later, Sturgis, later! Go!"

He took the Portkey, and a few seconds later, he vanished, leaving Tonks alone in the darkened cell filled with corpses. Taking an unsteady deep breath – and immediately regretting it because of the stench, she staggered out into the hallway. From the looks of things, Wilson was still burning – and from the twitching, likely still alive.

She stared at him for a long few seconds. She understood what Moody had said about the visceral nature of combat after her first fights as an Auror. She had understood what Moody had mentioned about the horrors of war from reading page after page of old reports about the First War against Voldemort.

But this was different. This was brutal, bloody, sickening...

"I signed up... I signed up for this," she whispered to herself, looking away from Wilson and slowly moving towards the stairs up, towards the courtyard and the open warzone. "And then we brought Harry in... good God, what have I done?"

Constant vigilance, Moody always said... not just against the enemy, but against our own rage, our own fear, and our own realization of what we've had to do.

"Well, that should hold Bellatrix for a few minutes," Sirius said with a pant, wiping sweat from his face as he leaned against his motorcycle.

"Are you kidding me?' Harry asked with disbelief, picking up his broom and carefully lowering the dazed Claudius Kemester against the wall.. "You kicked her down the stairs, fired a dozen curses after her, and then collapsed the staircase – you don't think she's dead?"

"Not by a long shot," Sirius retorted, climbing onto his bike and revving the engine, "because one thing Lestranges do better than they should is survive the impossible. Runs in the Black side of the family too. Now listen, we've got to get out of here before the entire place is turned to rubble either by us or Voldemort –"

"I'm not leaving without Tonks."

Sirius' eyes shot wide open even as he drew his wand to parry a curse that a broom-riding Death Eater decided to cast. "Excuse me?"

"We can't just abandon her here!" Harry said angrily, pulling his own wand free and Stunning the Death Eater without a second word. "Stupefy! Look, she'll be going to the Spire, I can meet her there!"

"Harry, that's suicidal – protego! She's got her mission, and we've got ours!"

"And we can still complete it! Look, take Kemester – vercundus! Here on the motorbike and leave," Harry said quickly, pulling Claudius Kemester to his feet and helping him get behind Sirius as he shot a Bludgeoning Curse at another Death Eater, this time missing completely. "I'll find Tonks and we'll get out on our own."

"Harry, for God's sake –"

"We're not leaving people behind!" Harry said furiously, straddling his broom. "We'll meet at the rendezvous, take Kemester and go!"

"Look, I know you two are fucking now, but that's not a good reason to –"

"Sirius, I'm not changing my mind – go!"

And before Sirius could scream out another word, Harry shot into the sky.

They emerged from the south-eastern spire just as victorious howls split the frigid air.

Tony twirled his wand lightly around his finger. "Well, that's not good. Have a plan?"

"Apparating out?" Kemester said tightly.

"If any of the enchantments on this place are still intact, you'd be a puddle of gore," Tony replied pleasantly. "But I'm assuming your 'friends' here might have a plan, so what was that?"

"How the fuck should I know?" Kemester spat. "I just..."

His voice trailed off, as he looked towards the wall. Charging across the splintered, broken courtyard, were none other than Reed Larshall and Leon Sanders.

"Well, that's stupid," Tony said with a sniff, "why aren't they just Apparating?"

"Because I think they might find it a tad difficult to concentrate right now," Kemester replied in a low voice, pointing at the two Hit Wizards – and right behind them was a horde of very angry-looking werewolves and Azkaban escapees, all screaming bloody murder.

There was a brief pause and then –

"You know," Tony said thoughtfully, stroking his beard, "we could take them."

"RUN!"

"Or that."

They both broke into a run, moving to intersect Larshall's twisting course, which seemed to be deviating towards the center of the prison...

"Remind me again why we're going towards the Spire?" Tony roared.

For a split second, Kemester wondered that too – and then he saw the heavy-looking package on Larshall's back...

"Because we're going to destroy it," he whispered between breaths.

The spells were nearly completed – the ritual was nearly done.

Voldemort paused in his chant to survey his work very carefully. Since Shackbolt's obliteration, he had made very good progress channelling and transforming the raw magical fibre Nagini surrounded. Very slowly, but surely, he had carefully transfigured the fibre into a physical form, looking very much a distended muscle sinew, coiled on the floor, albeit glowing with a feral multicoloured light.

"Nagini, I'll have a treat for you once we're done," Voldemort said lightly, carefully resisting the urge to stroke his snake lest he disrupt the potent magical circuit running inside her. "I wonder what the pure, solidified, concentrated essence of magic would taste like –"

"Probably like chicken."

Voldemort did not turn yet, and he did not allow his face to convey surprise. Not impossible, but certainly improbable – and most certainly impressive.

"Auror Shacklebolt."

Shacklebolt returned the words with a flurry of curses – all of which Voldemort easily deflected as he turned to face the man.

Shacklebolt's Auror robes were charred rags, and most of his 'armor' was seared beyond repair. Voldemort guessed from the man's slightly halting motions that he was burned terribly across most of his body, although those burns could not be seen.

"Impressive, your survival," Voldemort began slowly, lazily firing a few curses at the Auror that made him backpedal few steps. "You must have Apparated out on reflex – I can't help but be impressed you didn't badly splinch yourself in the instant. If I wasn't going to kill you in the next minute I'd offer a job."

"Good luck killing me," Shacklebolt hissed.

Voldemort gave a short sigh – the game was now getting tiresome. "Auror, you are outclassed, you are outmatched, and you're clearly out of options, so why are you adamant to spend your last few seconds of life wasting my time?"

"I could think of worse things," Shacklebolt said, giving Voldemort a toothy smile. "But that's not the point – I've done what I came here to do."

For the first time that night, Voldemort felt a twinge of uncertainty – something wasn't right about this. He didn't show it though. "So you actually have a plan?"

"Enjoy death, my Lord," Shacklebolt said mockingly, dipping his head slightly. "I've heard it'll be a new experience for you."

And before Voldemort could say another word, the Auror Disapparated.

It didn't take long before Voldemort put the pieces together. The attacks had done little to thwart his progress – indeed, they seemed like little more than suicidal delaying tactics...

Until perhaps the Spire itself could be destroyed...

He spun around and raised his wand, beginning to chant as quickly as he whirled in his mind – it would take all of his formidable skill to complete the spell in time, feeding off of what magical energy remained inside of the Spire, pushing his skills and creativity to the limit. He wasn't going to lose all of his servants and his work because a fool of an Auror planned to destroy the game board instead of playing to the end.

No, if that is what he deigns to do, I will simply remove my pieces.

The arched double doors at the base of the Spire were already pushed open as Tonks limped towards them, out of breath and barely able to walk, let alone sprint. But she had – all the way from the walls across the courtyard, a gang of werewolves in hot pursuit.

But this time, she wasn't alone.

"Get inside!" Kingsley called out, raising his wand. "Protego horribilus!"

Tonks dove for the ground as Kingsley's spell erupted just behind her into one of the nastiest Shield Charms that the Department ever taught their Aurors, and only the best. Tonks couldn't help but wince at the sudden sizzling sound as the werewolves reared back in agony from the Shield Charm – or maybe it was because she landed on her ribs, she couldn't tell, it was all blurring together –

"Tonks, go!"

She scrambled to her feet, ran past Kingsley and through the doors – only to see a figure zoom above her and crash headlong against the far wall.

"Harry!"

Harry's female simulacrum hurriedly rose and running across the room, pulled Tonks into an embrace. "Don't use that name," Harry

whispered quickly. "In fact, don't call me by name at all, not with Shackbolt around. Where's your team –"

"Tonks, the team's coming up, take positions!" Kingsley shouted, magic exploding from his wand as he saw four figures running at full speed towards them – closely pursued by a veritable horde.

Tonks quickly broke the embrace, and ran to the doors, Harry right behind her. It wasn't a very defensible room – even with no windows, there was practically nothing in the room besides a shimmering energy column in the very center – the doors were the only defensive option...

But Harry wasn't taking cover behind the doors. Instead, he was standing in full view, pointing his wand out at the charging group –

"Woman, get down!" Kingsley roared. But Harry wasn't listening, slowly moving his wand, as if he was trying to mimic another spell

"Protego horribilus!"

Tonks and Kingsley both dove for cover as the spell launched like a rocket between the doors, erupting just behind the Hit Wizards, exploding outwards in a miasmic bubble of pure sizzling energy. A second later, the sizzling sound split the air – along with sudden, violent screaming.

"Son... son of a bitch," Tonks heard Kingsley say aloud, and despite everything she had seen and heard tonight, she felt a bit of pride. Even though we might have screwed up the simulamancy ritual that time, it was a pretty impressive screw-up.

Harry quickly darted back behind the doors, and in the nick of time – the Hit Wizards had finally entered the Spire, out of breath and panting from the run. And taking that cue, Tonks shoved herself against her door and painfully slammed it shut with an echoing bang.

For a long ten seconds, there was silence.

"Lady," Larshall finally began, wiping the sheen of sweat from his large forehead and looking at Harry with admiration. "I don't know who the hell you are, but I want to buy you a drink and give you a job. Ever considered the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

"Shut it with the recruitment, Larshall," Kemester spat. He looked up and glared at Tonks. "So, another 'friend' of yours, Nymphadora?"

Tonks' eyes narrowed dangerously – from the knowing look on Kemester's face, he had figured out her last deception – when she and Harry in his other simulacrum had convinced Kemester to leave in order to interrogate Cuffe weeks earlier. But before Harry could say anything, she spoke. "Best not be bringing that up right now, Kemester, we just saved your life, and we've got a job to do."

"Right," Kingsley said tersely, accepting the backpack from Larshall and pulling free what Tonks guessed was the explosive device. "We set this, and get our Portkey out – wait a minute, there was four of you running, where's the last guy?"

Kemester looked around quickly, off-guard, before shrugging his shoulders. "No idea. Must have fallen –"

BANG.

"Colloportus!" Harry snapped, pointing his wand at the door. The squelching sound echoed as the door sealed shut, but Tonks guessed from the force of the last blow, it wouldn't hold for long.

"We don't have time to waste here," Tonks said tersely. "Larshall, set up the explosive."

"Right on you," Larshall replied with a nod, taking the clockwork device and stepping towards the spire. He bent to place it on the floor –

"I can't let you do that, Larshall."

Tonks turned towards the source of his voice, and drew her wand. Leon Sanders, the Hit Wizard, had drawn his wand – and was pointing it at Larshall.

"Excuse me?" Kemester growled.

"The Dark Lord has not yet taken leave of this building," Sanders continued, his voice the same expressionless monotone. "I can't let you destroy it."

"He's under the Imperius Curse," Tonks said aloud, pointing her own wand at Sanders.

Kemester and Larshall exchanged glances, and both drew wands. Harry began to circle, moving out of Sanders' range of vision -

"Leon, it's five-to-one odds against you," Kingsley said slowly. "What makes you think you can stop us?"

"I don't need to stop you," Sanders said emotionlessly. "Just Vanish your explosive."

He raised his wand. "Evanes-"

"FLAMMA LACERO!"

The spell had been shouted from two throats, and the effect was instantaneous.

The first lash took off Sanders' wand hand, cauterizing the wound instantly.

The second lash bisected him horizontally.

With a scream, the Hit Wizard collapsed to the ground, and Larshall rushed back to the explosive, hurriedly assembling the parts even as Tonks and Kingsley rushed to Sanders.

Harry and Kemester only lowered their wands and glared at each other.

"Damn it you two, a Stunning Spell would have been enough!" Kingsley snarled, rolling Sanders onto his front and hastily cauterizing the end of his torso where his legs and most of his abdomen had been.

"Wouldn't have been nearly as cathartic," Kemester retorted.

Some kind of catharsis, Tonks thought furiously as she felt desperately for a pulse and to stem whatever blood was seeping through the cauterized areas. "I think he's still alive –"

"We can correct that," Kemester said darkly, striding up towards Sanders.

But Sanders was already stirring, his expression pain-wracked, but filled with shock as he looked out at everyone. "What the... where am _"

BOOM.

Tonks felt her feet lift the ground as she and Kingsley were thrown across the room. She tried to roll into a landing, but she landed on her ribs, and couldn't help but moan in pain.

Kemester turned to strike the new attacker, but a single spell sent him flying across the room. He skidded across the floor, and there was a sickening crack as he hit the wall legs first.

"Who the –"

But Tonks' unfinished question was answered when the figure emerged, tossing his hood back as his Disillusionment Charm faded. Revealing a man, a man with a swarthy, twisted face...

A face Tonks recognized from an old training file – and from one of Moody's nightmarish stories. A man who had once been a professional Quidditch player and a duelling champion, who had turned on the Ministry with a vengeance after blackmail from the Department of Magical Sports destroyed his career and a

complication with the Auror Department killed his wife. A great man broken by grief – and coerced into the Death Eaters by rage and a thirst for revenge.

The man who had been able to kill both Prewett brothers when four other Death Eaters had failed.

Kemester struggled to pull himself up into a standing position, but his shattered leg prevented any movement. "T-Tony?"

"Antonin, actually," the man said smoothly, approaching Sanders, who was shaking with pain on the ground. Without a word, a sound like a gunshot split the air, and the Hit Wizard moved no more. "Or to be more precise, it's Antonin Dolohov, bitch."

The Disillusionment Charm he cast was instinctive, but Larshall knew that he would only have a minute before the Death Eater found him.

And I still have a job to do.

Hastily shoving the components of the explosive device together, he paused as he set the hourglasses – each timed for exactly one minute. He pulled off his boot and muttered "Portus" as quietly as he could, setting the timing so that they would leave only seconds before the explosive device went off.

Then taking a deep breath, he inserted his wand into the device. This was their one chance.

"Incito."

"Kemester, you moron, how didn't you recognize him –" Tonks spat as she fought to stand.

"Stay down, Nymphadora Tonks – none of you, even the crazy freak with the over-powered spells can't best me," Dolohov sneered.

"Having just faced your master and lived, I might dispute that claim," Kingsley said in a very low voice, picking up his wand and standing

quickly. "A proper duel, Dolohov, or has your honour left you the same way the rest of your principles did?"

"Spend fourteen years in Azkaban without a trial, and then talk to me about honour," Dolohov replied icily. "After what your slime did to my wife, you have no honour. At least as long as Nathan Cassane still walks free."

Tonks' eyes snapped wide open at the words. "What are you –"

Dolohov's hex hit her – literally – like a slap in the face. "Shut up and realize this – neither side in this charade is innocent, not by a fucking long shot, and I guess the cover up worked, if you've got no clue what's going on. Ah, the innocence of youth. Shame none of you are going to live long enough to get out of that."

"And neither will you!"

Dolohov whirled as Larshall's Disillusionment Charm dropped, but Larshall was already moving, hurling a boot to Kemester –

"It's a Portkey, go!"

Tonks was already moving, and so was Harry. Crossing to Kemester, Kingsley right behind her, they seized the boot. Looking up, she saw Larshall raise his wand – but his Shield Charm crumpled.

The next curse went through his chest.

"REED! ACCIO REED, ACCIO –"

But before Larshall could fly across the room from Kemester's screamed spells, Tonks felt the tug beneath her navel, and the world fell away.

It came without warning – the Spire lit up a brilliant white, and from every point of it, a wave of pure energy erupted.

The Death Eaters and werewolves tried to flee from it, but the second it touched them, it turned them into black mist, which flowed high into the sky like smoke on the wind.

For a second, the courtyard of Azkaban was empty and silent.

Click.

A second later, there was no courtyard of Azkaban.

Author's Notes: first of all, I'd like to thank you guys for the really enthusiastic response to the last chapter - it was really difficult to write, and I thank you all. In any case, this chapter will be significantly quieter, dealing with the aftermath of Azkaban, and we will FINALLY get on the long-awaited trail to the truth regarding the Potter Vaults (although, to be completely honest, I'm really quite surprised nobody's guessed it yet). As always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

Minister For Magic Cornelius Fudge slowly drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, his face as expressionless as he could make it as he fought to control his racing heartbeat.

Finally, he spun his chair and met Rufus Scrimgeour's eyes. "Why was I not informed regarding this mission?"

"Begging your pardon, Minister, but I did inform you of our extraction," Scrimgeour replied coolly, gesturing towards an official-looking document on the Minister's desk.

"You informed me you were withdrawing certain prisoners from Azkaban," Fudge growled, "and that you were transferring them to the Minister for parole discussions – you said nothing of the potential that the fortress could be destroyed!"

"In all due fairness, Minister, if you had desired further information, you could have placed a further inquiry," Scrimgeour replied, in an insufferably calm voice that made Fudge's blood boil. He's after my position, I can smell that smugness, that hunger for my power –

"How did you find out about the attack in the first place?"

"Hit Wizard Reed Larshall received a tip that parties with dangerous magic would be making a move for the fortress," Scrimgeour replied after a few seconds. "So, after equipping him with a necessary failsafe in case of... complications, we got our prisoners – the ones valuable to the Ministry – out of Azkaban and transferred them to containment cells here."

"And since Mr. Larshall is unaccounted for and presumed dead, we don't have identification for the tip?" Fudge snapped, his temper rising as his fingers drummed faster and faster.

"With all due respect, Minister, it is a very good thing we got that tip – without it, every single prisoner in Azkaban would be freed, and the fortress would be in the possession of an enemy." Scrimgeour stood and placed the stack of files in his hands on the desk. "These are the preliminary debriefings from the two team members that survived, plus a statement from Hit Wizard Dmitri Kemester."

Fudge knew the last name, and his eyes narrowed. "Umbridge mentioned the man – she told me he was mentally unstable, a danger to the Ministry –"

"That is her opinion, and it has no legal weight," Scrimgeour said, his voice abruptly dropping an octave as he fixed Fudge with a threatening stare. "Your Undersecretary has a lot to answer for, Minister – if she took pre-emptive action and sent him to Azkaban, she violated Wizengamot accords that afford Dmitri Kemester the rights to a fair trial. And from what I've read of his statement, if he had been allowed to complete his mission and had stopped your planned announcement the day the Ministry attacked, we wouldn't have the testy situation we have with the goblins right now. Or at least it would be better controlled."

"Careful, Scrimgeour," Fudge said warily, rising to his feet, "I don't like your tone."

"And you shouldn't," Scrimgeour growled, "because between me and Amelia, we have to write about a hundred letters to the families of all the Hit Wizards and Aurors that died in Azkaban last night. And after that, I need to go and start training – I get the feeling we're going to need a lot more people in my Department in the next few months."

And with that, Scrimgeour spun on his heel and stormed out of Fudge's office, slamming the door behind him. The Minister huffed with disgust as he sat back down and flipped open the folders, beginning to read –

"You don't seem to be taking this as seriously as Scrimgeour would appreciate."

Fudge nearly jumped in his chair, and he glared up at the man who had seemingly stepped out of nowhere, an unreadable expression on his face. "For Merlin's sake, Cassane, you have to make an –"

"What, an appointment?" Nathan Cassane said lightly, and for his credit not sneering as he pulled his hands from the pockets of his brown overcoat. "So you can get to me when your time is right, Fudge? I don't think that'll work right now – the press is going to get wind of this, and they're going to want answers on how an unknown strike force massacred your guards and seized control of Azkaban before the fortress was destroyed. Minister, do you have those answers?"

Fudge shot to his feet. "I do not need you to tell me how to run my government, Cassane!"

"Then tell me, Minister, what I should say to the International Confederation of Wizards and the press," Cassane retorted, sitting down opposite Fudge and fixing him with a steely glare. "Because, as of right now, I don't have a statement. I don't have enough information. I have suspicions, but the world doesn't want to hear my hypotheses – particularly if they don't line up with yours."

"Cassane, what do you want?"

"I want answers," Cassane snapped. "Furthermore, I want your answers. I want to know who attacked Azkaban, I want to know why the fortress fell so quickly, and more importantly, I want to know why a hundred good witches and wizards died –"

"What do you want me to say, Cassane?" Fudge snarled, his temper finally breaking. "That I didn't see this coming, that I wasn't adequately prepared, that I didn't do enough to protect the guards? Any one of my answers to those questions will end my career, and with no Minister, what's to stop the goblins from making another move –"

"Cornelius, this is why I'm here," Cassane said forcefully, rising to his feet and putting a hand on the Minister's shaking shoulder. "I'm here to make sure we have answers that match, something that can work until we know more. Besides, cooperation with me will undoubtedly make the inquiry into the affairs of your office a lot easier –"

"For the last time, I'm not firing Dolores Umbridge," Fudge began heatedly.

"Oh, we're far past that," Cassane said with a grim chuckle, doffing his hat and running a hand through his silver hair, rendering it even more untidy. "No, I want her arrested."

"Cassane –"

"Fine, you can find a way to get her off on a lighter offense with a bloody fine, if you need her so much," Cassane said exasperatedly, "but I want evidence on record. Hopefully, for her sake, she has paperwork specifying the conditions of Kemester's incarceration – might save her jail time."

"Dolores likely has all of her paperwork in order," Fudge said stiffly.

"I hope so, for your sake. Now, I've already read through the debriefing papers, but we're going to need more to present to the press – according to Shackbolt's statement, there were a significant number of werewolves on the island, and all of the prisoners were somehow freed – and they had their wands. We're talking about extremely powerful magic here, Minister – somebody very dangerous."

"Sirius Black," Fudge said suddenly. "He could easily be behind this, he escaped from Azkaban before –"

But Cassane was shaking his head. "Black is very powerful, but he has no definitive sway with the nastier elements of the werewolves. And before you even say it, Dumbledore wouldn't dare involve himself in this – remember, he was responsible for putting some of those people in that prison, and both of us know wherever he is, he

has not taken leave of his senses enough to free the monsters of Azkaban and ally with werewolves."

"He's a possibility we can't rule out," Fudge said hotly, "and it would make sense too – he could have spent the last two months in hiding, building his forces before moving on Azkaban –"

"I refuse to support that statement," Cassane said flatly, his icy tone brooking no argument.

"Fine... and that means we have nothing. Although..." Fudge tapped his chin thoughtfully. "It could have been an inside job. A traitor..."

"The only traitor that would have that sort of power would be..." Cassane's voice trailed off as he arrived at Fudge's conclusion. "Fudge, no."

"It makes sense, Cassane! Admit it, no reasonable man chooses to voluntarily accept the Warden position straight out of the Ministry," Fudge argued. "Maybe he lost control –"

"Nathaniel Charon was a good man," Cassane said quietly, but his voice was filled with contained anger. "I served with him in the First War, he was a good man, and he would never –"

"Maybe he cracked at Azkaban – the presence of the Dementors –"

"Is not a good enough reason to blame a decorated Hit Wizard –"

"Then maybe it was a plan!" Fudge's eyes lit up. "Perhaps that was it! He utilized the Spire's magic, freed the prisoners, contacted the werewolves, and then informed the Ministry, knowing this was his one opportunity to destroy all the Death Eaters in one fell swoop, just like he tried to do years ago!"

Cassane paused, before speaking. "And what about the guards?"

"Perhaps that is why he vanished," Fudge replied thoughtfully, rising to his feet and moving behind his chair to look out his magical window

at the murky clouds outside. "Out of guilt, he died with his men, or when the failsafe destroyed the fortress."

"The man had a better sense of honour than that –"

"So he was under the Imperius Curse, then!" Fudge snapped, his patience running out as he turned around to glare at Cassane. "Damn it, Cassane, do you have a better explanation for this? It makes sense, and the public will accept the answer! Fortunately for us, Charon has no family – none of them will mind the statement."

Cassane didn't speak for a long few seconds, and did not meet Fudge's eyes, instead running his hand along the brim of his hat.

"Fudge, while everyone else might believe that load that besmirches the name of a good man," Cassane finally said quietly, looking up, his glinting brown eyes filled with disgust, "I won't. And frankly, you and I both know there is a more logical explanation."

"And that is?"

"That Dumbledore was right all along," Cassane said in a grim voice. "That Lord Voldemort has indeed returned, and has chosen to seize Azkaban and free his servants."

Fudge's eyes flashed as he winced at the name. "That's insane and you know it – there's no definitive proof He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned –"

"It makes a hell of a lot more sense than Charon doing it," Cassane said, his voice deathly quiet.

"I thought you were a good enough politician by now to realize, Cassane, that without definitive proof that he has returned, people aren't going to believe – I mean, nobody believed Dumbledore, that's why he lost his positions –"

"Fudge, you were behind that," Cassane said, his voice unwavering, "so please don't insult my intelligence."

"Then don't insult mine!" Fudge hissed, rounding on Cassane, his heart pounding and blood rushing to his face. "It would mean the end of my career here if You-Know-Who was found to be back since last June – and that means more than relying on the word of Harry Potter! Whose side are you on, Cassane –"

"This isn't about sides, Fudge, it's about facts."

"And right now, you don't have any, just hearsay and extrapolations, the same thing you're basing your damned inquiry into the Ministry on –"

"Then what if I could get evidence one way or another?" Cassane snarled, rising to his feet and striding up to Fudge. "Definitive proof, incontrovertible?"

Fudge raised his hands as he stepped around Cassane. "I'd love to see it."

"Then I'll need some things from the Ministry," Cassane said steadily. "Namely free access to the Department of Mysteries. Give me that and I'll go along with your story – until I can find proof that proves or disproves Voldemort's presence."

Fudge frowned as he moved towards his fireplace, pulling down a small silver pot. "Why the Department of Mysteries? And would you please stop saying that name?"

"Between my library and extensive collection of artifacts, and the Department's equipment, I may be able to create something to detect Lord Voldemort, and produce physical evidence that he is alive," Cassane said steadily, blatantly ignoring Fudge's wince. "It'll be experimental – likely very risky, but right now, I'll take anything."

Fudge hesitated – the Unspeakables didn't like interference, and if Cassane did find something, it would only mean disaster –

"Fudge, if it helps you make a decision, most of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement already believe that Lord Voldemort is alive and active," Cassane said curtly, crossing his arms across his

chest. "Although they'd refuse to admit it. Suffice to say, wouldn't you prefer that Scrimgeour wasn't the one to prove Voldemort is indeed back?"

"Fine, the Department is open to you!" Fudge snapped with exasperation, unwilling to admit in the pit of his gut, Cassane had a point regarding Scrimgeour. "Just be discreet – I don't want this getting out." He tossed a handful of Floo Powder into the fireplace, and immediately the fire roared green.

"And where are you going?"

"Muggle Prime Minister's office," Fudge said tightly. "And I'm fairly certain it's not going to go well."

"I thought you'd be at the Ministry," Tonks began slowly, sliding up onto the bar stool next to the cloaked man.

"I caught a free moment," the man replied curtly, his voice slightly muffled by his hood as he raised a glass of goblin rye and touched it to his scarred lips. "They're releasing me to St. Mungo's tomorrow, though, so I figured I'd make the most of my last night off."

"And you're going willingly?" the ruby-haired Metamorphmagus asked quietly as Tom slid a glass of goblin rye across the bar. She snagged it easily. "Doesn't sound like the Hit Wizard I grew to despise."

"Well, shit happens," Dmitri Kemester snapped, finishing the rest of his drink and slamming the glass down on the creaking bar, hard. Tom threw him a disapproving look, but at the drop of a few Sickles, slid another tumbler of rye across the bar. "Surprised you're here, though – thought you'd be with your little friend that joined in on our bout in Azkaban."

"She had other things to do," Tonks replied shortly, sniffing her rye for a few seconds before taking a heavy swig.

"What, report to Dumbledore, like the rest of your 'Order of the Phoenix' posse?" Kemester spat, turning to glare at her, burned skin crinkling around his eyes as he glowered. "How is it that only 'Order'

members – and myself – got out of Azkaban alive –"

"Dumbledore's gone, Kemester," Tonks growled, lowering her voice as her hair went a sodden azure. "Vanished completely, nobody knows where he is. Hell, why do you think Scrimgeour was so on edge when we were getting debriefed, he knows there's no counterbalance anymore against whatever Fudge wants! He says one thing, he's out of a job, and the last thing we need right now is unemployed Aurors or Hit Wizards, particularly ones with any skill."

Kemester snorted. "Fudge isn't that stupid."

Tonks cocked an eyebrow. "You buy that, even with Scrimgeour in prime position to take Fudge's job?"

Kemester paused for a few seconds, listening to the surrounding din of the bar, and then gave a disgusted sigh. "I see your point."

"Thought so."

"And to think I spent two months in Azkaban in an attempt to save Fudge's life," Kemester said sourly, sticking a misshapen finger into his glass and toying with the edge of the strong liquor.

"You were trying to save your own hide too, Kemester, don't even lie," Tonks said tiredly. "You gave Lucius Malfoy what he needed, and in return, he triggered his 'new bank' experiment, and when he screwed up, you were trying to cover your trail and protect the Minister from the screw-up. Shame Umbridge thought you were a dangerously unstable force – wonder where on earth she would have gotten that idea."

Kemester scowled. "You figured it all out –"

"And to think, that if you had succeeded, the bombing in the Ministry would have killed a lot more Aurors and Hit Wizards than if they had been patrolling in Diagon Alley." Tonks shook her head. "I was there, that attack was property destruction, only a few injuries – people actually died when the Ministry was gutted."

"And who, I reckon, was behind that?" Kemester asked with a snort.

Tonks shifted in her chair, her expression emotionless. "Investigation isn't coming up with leads – well, at least no leads that anybody at the Ministry can prosecute."

There was another loud clank – Kemester had drained another glass. "So you believe it too?"

"With the evidence," Tonks said slowly, "it's hard not to."

"I tried beating the information out of Snape and got nowhere, and Malfoy was smart enough not to leak anything, but it makes sense," Kemester muttered morosely. "Bloody wonderful. And I'm going to spend the time 'convalescing' in St. Mungo's – a prime target."

"Umbridge won't be able to touch you –"

"If she got to that bastard Sanders, she can get to anyone," Kemester growled. "And... and with Reed gone..."

His voice trailed off, and he stared into his glass. "You ever lose a partner, Tonks?"

"Aurors don't usually get partners, the same way Hit Wizards do," Tonks said quietly.

"Reed... he went out like a fucking hero... and he did it to save me, what the hell does that say? That I'm worth saving, that my life has more value, next to his?" Kemester said bitterly. "Look at me, I'm a disgraced Hit Wizard everyone thinks is mental, what value is there? Was I such a great partner, in the end?"

Tonks looked away – she hadn't been expecting this sort of emotion, this sort of pain from Kemester, a man who had done his best to make hers and Harry's lives hell. Maybe he has a soul after all. "He did it to save us –"

"He threw the boot to save me," Kemester spat, "knowing that I couldn't walk with a broken leg – and knowing that he couldn't make it out. He bit the curse for me – and what did I do to earn that?"

"You don't have to earn that –"

"Then why don't you just explain to me why everyone that was close to me dies?" Kemester snarled. "First my mother, then Bartholomew, and now Reed – and what have I been able to do, Tonks?"

Tonks looked at the man's horrifically scarred face for a long few seconds, biting back revulsion. But then she turned away and sighed. "Sorry, I don't know what to say."

"What?"

"You don't want my anger and you certainly don't want my pity," Tonks said with a scowl. "No, you want an excuse to die, and right now, I'm not giving that to you – I'll let your guilt keep you alive."

From the expression on Kemester's face, Tonks guessed he was speechless – he clearly hadn't been expecting that reaction, but right now, Tonks didn't really care. A lack of sleep was doing nothing for her patience and less for her temper, and right now, she didn't care an ounce about Kemester.

"But just so you know," she continued, oblivious to Kemester opening his mouth to speak, "we did manage to get your father out before Azkaban was destroyed."

Kemester turned away instantly. "I have no desire to talk to a traitor."

Tonks shrugged – it had been worth a shot. "Fine, that was my reason for coming here, so I guess –"

"No it wasn't."

"Excuse me?"

For the first time that evening, Kemester smiled. It was a bitter, caustic grin, but it was a grin nonetheless. "I'm not a stupid man, Tonks, and while Azkaban didn't help my looks or my mind, I haven't forgotten anything important. You're here because I know you impersonated an attorney who went along with Potter's lawyer."

"And I know you kidnapped Harry Potter and proceeded to beat him to a bloody pulp in an interrogation room, so we're even," Tonks replied curtly, keeping her voice quiet.

"For which he nearly killed me at Hogwarts," Kemester retorted, "so my score with him remains open. But with the view of the public of Harry Potter – no, your crime has made you powerful enemies, and if it is found that you have any ties to the goblins as well..."

Tonks carefully kept her expression blank, even as her mind exploded with panic. How the bloody hell would he know about Harry's negotiations between the goblins and that Delacour girl? I can't let on that I know...

"We both have committed crimes to achieve our ends," she said coolly. "You reveal, I reveal."

"And vice-versa," Kemester agreed softly, "but the crimes you committed are more severe, and would make you some very powerful enemies – and I have nothing left to lose, Tonks."

She gritted her teeth as her hair went grey white for a few seconds before darkening immediately. "So what do you want?"

Kemester beckoned for her to come closer, and against all instincts, Tonks moved in. Much to her surprise, despite the horrid injuries, it smelt like Kemester had actually taken a shower between the mind-numbing debriefing and coming to the Leaky Cauldron.

"There is a leak in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Kemester whispered, his raspy voice hot against her ears. "A big one – files have been raided, pieces are missing. If it is indeed true that You-Know-Who has returned, I suspect information is being passed to him."

"I already silenced an agent of Volde-"

"This has been since the beginning, Tonks," Kemester hissed. "Since the... since the encounter with the Muggle aeroplane, or at the very least the Gringotts bombing in August. Confidential information is getting out of files – Hit Wizard files."

Tonks paused – she hadn't expected that. Sirius hadn't mentioned a Hit Wizard agent when Voldemort had him possessed... "Do you think it's a Hit Wizard?"

"Possibly," Kemester whispered. "Hell, it could have been Sanders, he was obviously under Imperius –"

"But somebody would have had to put him under Imperius," Tonks finished, following Kemester's logic. "Do you have clues?"

"I have an entire folder of information back in my desk – use that. I can't do anything, considering after my... convalescence in St. Mungo's, I doubt Bones will put me on any assignment besides a desk or training. But be circumspect." Kemester lowered his voice. "If word got out an Auror was investigating a Hit Wizard on my request –"

"Why me, then?"

Kemester gave a disgusted snort and turned back to his refilled drink, which he took a long swig of, nearly draining the glass. "Because Reed is dead and you're close to Potter – don't give me that look, I'm not stupid! But that also means," he added with another snort, "that you're the only one I can trust with this."

Tonks gave the Hit Wizard an incredulous look – she could hardly believe what she was hearing, and the sheer ludicrousness of it all nearly brought a laugh to her throat. "You're joking."

"I wish I was. And one more thing – most of this information is tied to the investigation of Sirius Black, which is something everyone has a vested interest in, so you'll want to be cautious."

"Fine," Tonks said with a scowl, sliding away and tossing a handful of silver on the counter. "I need to get back to the Ministry – don't do anything stupid, Hit Wizard."

"One thing."

"What?"

"You said you silenced one of his agents," Kemester said in a low voice, and despite herself, Tonks stepped closer. It's probably better not to be overheard anyways... "Who?"

Tonks looked down for a few seconds, clenching her fist before she met Kemester's eyes. "Wilson, Rogan Wilson. He was an Auror, and a Death Eater. He died at Azkaban."

Kemester blinked. "Really? How?"

"I assume the fire killed him," Tonks replied emotionlessly, her hair going matte black. "Either that or the blood loss." She shrugged. "Or the wand shards driven through his penis and testicles, I really can't be sure."

Kemester recoiled, wincing with imagined pain. "How did that happen?"

Tonks' eyes went bright green and her expression hardened. "What do you think?"

And with that, she stormed out, forcing her hair back to bubblegum pink and her eyes purple as she fought against the seething pit of rage in her gut, very much aware that Kemester was watching her leave with a wary expression on his face.

Harry slumped into the chair in Aberforth's tiny kitchen and stared in disbelief at Sirius. "Tell me you're kidding."

"I wish I was kidding," Sirius replied with a disgusted snort, dropping into his own chair and leaning heavily on the table. "He fell asleep on

the ride over – and he hasn't woken up since. And from what I've seen... Harry, I don't know –"

"So you're telling me that he's... what, fallen into a coma?" Harry asked incredulously, raking a hand through his hair. "All that work, and now we can't even get anything out of him?"

"We knew he was sick when we pulled him out of Azkaban," Sirius said tiredly, rubbing his eyes – neither of them had managed to get more than a few hours of sleep, the bloody memories were still too fresh. "From the look of him, it's magical consumption – and judging the pretty shoddy medical care in Azkaban, it's probably been untreated for years. At this advanced stage, we're lucky the man's still alive."

"Fantastic," Harry muttered, slouching deeper into his chair, wishing that he could just close his eyes, get a few hours of sleep, maybe next to Tonks if he was lucky, instead of falling into a nightmare that woke him in a cold sweat. "Just fantastic."

Sirius sighed. "Look, Cassane's on his way – hopefully, he'll be able to help us. From the owl he sent me, he's been dealing with the International Confederation of Wizards all day, I'm sure he'd want a break from all that... by the way, where did you hide your simulacrum?"

"Both are hidden in whatever's left of the Shrieking Shack," Harry replied heavily. "Nobody goes there, so I think they'll be safe... shit, Sirius, we're lucky to be alive –"

Suddenly, there was a rattle of hurried footsteps on the stairs. Harry and Sirius scrambled for their wands –

"Relax, it's just me," Nathan Cassane said wearily, shutting the door behind him, and pulling off his hat to reveal a surprisingly dishevelled appearance.

"Like hell it is," Sirius growled, not lowering his wand an inch. "What did Harry –"

"He slept with Nymphadora Tonks two nights ago, are you happy?" Cassane interrupted tiredly, hanging his cloak on the hook. "Now budge over, I want to see the judge."

Sirius dropped his wand and stepped to the side, allowing Cassane to enter the tiny guest bedroom where Harry and Tonks had slept together and where Claudius Kemester was now lying comatose.

Cassane drew his wand and muttered a few words. Harry's heart leapt into his chest when he saw both the old man in the bed and the tip of Cassane's wand glow golden, but then the glow faded, and Cassane sighed.

"It's consumption," he whispered. "Damn."

"You can't do anything –"

"If I could, I would have saved Charlus years ago," Cassane replied, closing the door to the guest room and moving to one of the few empty chairs in the tiny room. "But there is good news – I'm certain he'll wake. The Kemesters have a frightening tenacity."

Harry thought of the grotesquely twisted Dmitri Kemester and couldn't resist a shudder. "I guess you could say that. Not sure it's a good thing."

"Right now, the son is out of the picture," Cassane said calmly, wordlessly Summoning the scotch bottle to his hand along with a few glasses. "After an internment at St. Mungo's that he should have had months ago for a mental evaluation, Bones has decided to put him in charge of training, where hopefully the Ministry can begin to rebuild their forces. We all lost a lot of people at Azkaban."

"So did Voldemort, I saw that explosion," Sirius pointed out.

But Cassane was shaking his head, uncorking the bottle and generously pouring himself a glass of scotch. "We don't know, Sirius. We just don't know. Right now, I've been negotiating with the Minister and the International Confederation, trying to get a coherent story straight for the wizarding public that will hold up under scrutiny, and

somehow the Prophet got word something's up, so they've been clawing for whatever scraps of information they can find. Scotch, Sirius?"

"Thank you," Sirius replied, accepting the glass and swirling the liquid within it gently. "So what now, then?"

"If we could have incontrovertible proof Voldemort is indeed alive and active," Cassane said with a snort, "all of our lives would be a lot easier. Even Fudge is beginning to see that. And right now I'd settle for some proof that Dumbledore is around too."

Harry let out a long slow breath. "Well, right now I need whatever information Kemester Senior might have – those attacks at Hogwarts could still be happening, and if... and if those simulamancy visions –"

"More glimpses," Cassane muttered, "as visions imply an element of stable fact."

"Whatever – if I have another one of those, I might be able to find whoever's behind the attacks, and how to stop them," Harry finished impatiently. "And that'll be one more problem off my list. But to do this, I need money, and the Potter Vaults –"

"And with the judge out of commission, you really only have one option left," Cassane said coolly. "The option I suggested in the beginning."

"Snape," Sirius growled. "You know, I didn't see old Snivellus at Azkaban."

Harry frowned – Sirius was right, they hadn't seen Snape. "That's a little strange – I got the impression that Voldemort threw everything he had at Azkaban – so where was he?"

"It's possible he's dead," Sirius said, unable to keep a note of vicious hope out of his voice.

"Not Snape," Cassane said emphatically. "We would have found the body if Voldemort was looking to make an example of him. No, I

suspect he's lying low, likely in hiding. I can check my old records, see if I can find any evidence of where Snape used to hide in his Death Eater days, I know I should still have those on file..."

Harry glanced at Sirius. "Yeah, Nathan, I wanted to ask you about that."

"What, about Snape?" Cassane asked, taking a sip of his scotch.

"Not exactly," Harry said, carefully weighing every word. "I... I don't know how to approach this –"

Sirius was staring at Harry curiously, but Cassane simply downed the rest of his scotch, almost disinterested in Harry. Strange, Harry thought to himself, I thought he would have appeared more interested...

"Harry, what?"

"You have files on Snape," Harry finally began, fighting to keep his voice steady. "Do you have files on Antonin Dolohov as well?"

The glass slipped from Cassane's hand, and shattered on the floor. A hasty Reparo from Sirius' wand reconstructed it, but Cassane paid it no attention, his brown eyes fixed on Harry.

"Why do you ask, Harry?"

"Look, I remember that photograph you showed me," Harry began quickly, "and I remember you telling me that he was originally on your team – I saw him in Azkaban, he said something... that the Aurors had no honour as long as you walked free..."

A bemused expression crossed Cassane's face. "That's a strange thing to say, I was never directly affiliated with the Aurors, and neither was my team. And if I remember correctly, neither was Dolohov. A professional Quidditch player and an excellent duellist, but never an Auror."

"Okay, fine, but Dolohov definitely meant something when he said that," Harry continued doggedly. "He wasn't mad – not like Bellatrix was –"

"You encountered Bellatrix Lestrange?" Cassane asked interestedly.

"Long story, I'll tell you later," Sirius interjected, taking a swig of his scotch. "Go on, Harry."

"I don't know," Harry admitted after a few seconds. "It just seemed like Dolohov was trying to say something that actually meant something, if that makes any sense. Maybe... maybe he was blaming the Aurors for the death of his wife, I dunno – hey, wasn't she on your team too?"

Cassane's expression was very sombre. "Yes, Regina was on the team."

"Do you have records, maybe indicating how she died?" Harry pursued eagerly.

"Harry, what are you getting at?" Sirius asked with a frown.

"I'm just trying to make sense of everything!" Harry retorted. "Dolohov mentions Cassane by name, and Kemester Senior mentioned a cover-up when we found him – there's something going on, and if Cassane has records I can see –"

"They'll be woefully incomplete, I'm afraid," Cassane said quietly, rising to his feet.

Both Sirius and Harry looked up at Cassane, startled.

"What?" Harry asked incredulously. "What do you mean, incomplete?"

"Regina Dolohov died about the same time... about the same time my Cassandra passed away," Cassane whispered, looking away into the tiny smouldering fireplace. "And after she and my daughter were killed... it's hazy, Harry. Great gaps missing – everything's in pieces,

nothing directly correlates. The clearest memories I have after Cassandra's death are nearly a year later, waking up in a St. Mungo's hospital bed with Dumbledore sitting next to me, telling me I've had a traumatic nervous breakdown that rendered me comatose for a long time... I'm sorry, Harry, but I can't remember the details of Regina's death."

"They'd be on file," Sirius argued.

"I doubt it," Cassane replied with a snort. "Most of the events that occurred in those years were never properly documented – the Ministry was in such disarray, besieged on all sides by Voldemort and the Death Eaters, the bureaucracy couldn't keep up – particularly regarding events they'd rather forget."

But an idea was creeping into Harry's mind. "Hang on a second," he began slowly. "I think I'm asking the wrong person – Sirius, what do you remember? You were on the team with the Dolohovs too!"

Sirius frowned. "I know I was..." He ran his hand through his long, tangled hair and his frown grew deeper. "But it's mighty strange, I can hardly remember much of it. Azkaban did a number of my memories, let me tell you –"

"No, it's the Memory Charm," Cassane said quietly.

Sirius surged to his feet. "What?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Sirius, you agreed to it!" Cassane snapped, giving Sirius a glare. "Harry, just for clarification, in the contracts of every member on my team, there was a special clause indicating if they ever left the team, for confidentiality reasons, they would agree to a Memory Charm regarding their missions. So I suspect, when the team disbanded in February 1980 – from what I've been told, I can't actually remember how the group broke apart, and by the time I regained my senses and was out of St. Mungo's, Voldemort was gone – the contract was activated. It was to protect them, I might add," he continued, raising his eyebrows at a mutinous Sirius.

"Why? From who?"

"From the lawyers of the Death Eaters, for one," Cassane said with disgust, sitting back down and opening the scotch bottle again. "The ones that did get a trial often had the best lawyers money can buy – most provided by Parkinson & Baddock, one of the most powerful and prestigious legal firms in the country – and they did everything they could to slander those who brought in the Death Eaters. This was simply a partial way around their maneuvering, to protect my former employees, give them some plausible deniability."

"Fat lot it did me," Sirius muttered.

"Sirius, if I had been coherent and in possession of my full faculties, you would have gotten a trial," Cassane retorted. "You know that."

But Harry wasn't daunted. "But Memory Charms can be broken – Voldemort said so himself in the graveyard last year –"

"Not if you want the person's mind intact," Sirius said with a shiver.

"Sirius is unfortunately correct," Cassane said, picking up his glass and filling it again. "There's a very good reason that Obliviators are extremely well-trained – once you place a Memory Charm on a person, breaking it is a very dangerous endeavour, and placing the charm on the wrong person or at the wrong time can have disastrous consequences, simply because the removal of such a charm is so difficult."

"We can try," Harry insisted doggedly.

"No, we're not," Sirius retorted, glaring at Harry. "This is my sanity we're talking about, Harry, and I'm not willing to risk it like this, regardless of how good Cassane is."

"Even still, Harry, if you're looking for the truth... have you had a chance to view the memories I gave you?" Cassane asked suddenly.

Harry shifted in his seat. "In all fairness, I haven't had access to my Pensieve. Do we have one here?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I wish – I would have been able to sleep tonight if we did. Didn't you say that you had one at Hogwarts?"

"I do, but we don't know how safe it is to go back there," Harry said, shifting in his seat as he looked at Cassane. "With the temporal shift and the ghosts... that reminds me, did you talk to Bode?"

Cassane finally cracked a smile. "Better." Reaching into his jacket, he pulled from his pocket two impressively long metal rods – rods that couldn't have possibly come from the inside pocket of his jacket –

"Undetectable Extension Charm, Harry," Cassane explained, handing the rods to a shocked Harry with a hint of a smile. "Very useful in times like these. In any case, these rods are classic ghost-removal equipment, tweaked slightly to operate within Hogwarts. The first," he continued, pointing to the three-tined rod that strongly resembled a trident, "is an Ectoplasmic Harpoon. Hit a ghost with it, and it can't move from the tips unless you release it."

"Will it work if I hit a person being possessed?" Harry asked, taking a hold of the chill, unadorned steel bar and testing its weight gingerly.

"It should, Bode designed it that way. Now, the other rod you have there is an Ectoplasmic Projector," Cassane continued, pointing at the rod in Harry's other hand, which looked like it had a cheap Muggle satellite dish mounted on the top, with a tiny ring of pearls surrounding the base of the dish. "Once you 'spear' a ghost on the Harpoon, release it into the projector and it should be sent straight into the Department of Mysteries, where I will be able to study the ghosts in detail from my laboratory there."

"You have a lab in the Department of Mysteries?" Sirius asked incredulously. "How the hell did you land that?"

"Fudge needed to give me something to ensure my cooperation," Cassane replied with a tight smile. "I find it ironic he's bribing me with something that will ultimately destroy his career."

"Whose career are we destroying now?"

Harry twisted in his chair and pulled himself to his feet as Tonks slid into the room. From the look of her tangled, purple hair and shadows under her eyes, she looked ready to pass out. He wanted to pull her into a tight embrace, thankful they were all alive, but with a glance from Sirius, he raised his wand instead.

"Identify –"

"Harry, we slept together two nights ago, and right now, I'd be all for the sleeping again," Tonks replied tiredly, staggering into a chair at the end of the table. "Now whose career are we talking about ruining?"

"Fudge's," Cassane replied, raising his glass to his lips.

"Might as well add my name to the list, then," Tonks said, running a hand through her hair as Harry sat at the table next to her. "Kemester's using mutual blackmail –"

"What does he –" Harry began heatedly.

"No, this time I don't have a problem with it," Tonks cut him off, placing her hand in his. "Apparently, he thinks there's a mole in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – not just Sanders or... or Wilson. Another Hit Wizard, passing information to the Death Eaters."

Sirius sat straight up. "What the – since when? I didn't see any when I was at the meeting, not besides Wilson!"

"Does Kemester... have any ideas?" Harry asked, fighting back his surprise at the very notion of Kemester potentially being an ally.

"He has files on it," Tonks said with a snort. "In his desk, which I'm expected to retrieve. And with the Ministry as chaotic as it is right now, the last thing we need is another Hit Wizard-Auror conflict, particularly with the goblins as restless as they are."

"They don't know about Azkaban yet," Cassane said quickly.

"They will soon," Tonks said bitterly. "And as soon as they find out we lost a sizable fraction of our Hit Wizards and Aurors... yeah, this isn't going to be pretty." She rubbed her eyes. "And you'd think I'd be able to catch some sleep..."

"None of us have, Tonks," Sirius said quietly. "What about Kingsley? Any awkward questions about Harry?"

"Other than the fact that I told him 'she' is a member of the Order – which he doesn't buy – no questions that urgent," Tonks replied, prompting a sigh of relief from Harry. "The questions will come, mind you, but right now he's checking himself into St. Mungo's – considering the burns he took fighting Voldemort, I'm amazed he lasted as long as he did. So what have I missed?"

"I was just showing Harry the tools we'll be able to use when there is another spiritual attack upon Hogwarts," Cassane said, gesturing towards the rods sitting on Harry's abandoned chair, "and given that Harry is showing an interest in Claudius Kemester's memories, it would prove useful for him to return to Hogwarts. And in my opinion, you should go as well."

Harry started, as his heart jumped a bit inside his chest. That means more time alone with her... and that can only be a good thing...

Tonks frowned. "The Ministry's not going to let me take that much time off –"

"You were already debriefed, and I'm assuming your reports have been filed," Cassane cut her off, "so I'm assuming there wouldn't be anything wrong with a short leave of absence for rest and recuperation. Besides, Moody and McGonagall should be kept up to date."

"I'm not saying I disagree, but with the time dilation, we're talking about potentially losing a week of time at Hogwarts," Tonks said carefully. "I won't be able to extend my leave of absence that long –"

"I'll speak to Scrimgeour personally," Cassane said carefully.

"From what I've heard, he hates your guts," Tonks replied sharply, her eyes narrowing. "You honestly think you'll be able –"

"Harry, you had blackmail on Scrimgeour, didn't you?" Cassane asked unexpectedly.

"Yes," Harry replied cautiously, shifting in his seat. "I still do – wait, how did you –"

"I assumed that was how you got out of a prison sentence for the issue this summer," Cassane replied with a smirk. "Harry, I've seen it all before, and all the signs were there. But in any case, its existence is all I need to ensure Scrimgeour's cooperation – and trust me, I have much worse on him."

Sirius snorted. "Seems like the only person without a job to do is me. Although, I could work with that. Maybe I should go to France for a little holiday –"

"Not so fast, Mr. Black," Cassane said, rounding on Sirius as he picked up the bottle of scotch. "While I'm 'negotiating' with Scrimgeour, I'll see if I can pick up that file Kemester told Tonks about. I want you to pick through his notes and see if you can parse together an idea of who the mole is in the Department."

"That's actually a good idea, Nathan," Tonks said, her eyes brightening, "particularly considering Kemester mentioned that a lot of the information he collected were correlated to discrepancies into your whereabouts, Sirius."

"So talking to Moody, getting the Pensieve, and getting out?" Harry said, exhaling slowly. "Sounds easy."

"Right now," Cassane replied tightly, "I'm not making any assumptions."

It took a little bit of careful timing, but before Harry knew it, he and Tonks had slipped into the secret tunnel beneath Honeydukes and he was tucking the Cloak into his bag.

"Never seen this tunnel," Tonks whispered, examining the stone steps critically. "This leads straight into Hogwarts?"

"Yeah, it's what I used getting out of here last time," Harry replied, beginning to descend the stairs. "Light your wand - it gets dark, and it's a bit of a walk."

They kept quiet as they descended the stairs into the cold dank passage, Harry leading and keeping a wary eye ahead in the tunnel.

"Oops... oh –"

Harry half-turned, only to catch the Metamorphmagus in his arms, an embarrassed grin on her face as her hair went red with her cheeks.

"Slipped on the stair," she whispered.

Harry smiled, and on an impulse, he kissed her lightly as he helped her up. "You're not as clumsy as you used to be, you know."

"Who's to say that little trip wasn't intentional?" Tonks asked, her voice daring Harry to take her in his arms again.

"What, you want to... you want to do it here?" Harry asked with amazement, unbelieving of his luck.

"Why not?" Tonks asked, her voice becoming sultry as her hair went curly and lusciously purple. "You could have me up against this moist, wet cavern wall... all the metaphors I could use..."

Harry's voice was barely above a whisper. "Are... are you serious?"

And abruptly, Tonks winked at him, her hair going short and turning bright pink again. "No, but it's good to know you're horny and easy to tempt."

"Don't forget I was the one who convinced you to stay back the first time," Harry returned with a smirk.

"Yeah... yeah, you did," Tonks replied quietly. There was something off about her voice, and her expression, and Harry frowned.

"Look, is something wrong?"

Tonks looked as if she wanted to say something, but couldn't figure out the words. "I...I...I dunno, Harry, I just don't know."

Strangely, Harry felt something in his gut – the beginnings of panic. "Look, I know wasn't great... I mean, I wasn't really romantic, it was my first time –"

"Really, I couldn't tell," Tonks replied sarcastically, but she gave Harry a small smile before his self-esteem took a nose dive.

"I just... I just never would have thought... well, you know –"

"That you'd be having sex with a smoking hot Metamorphmagus seven years your senior at fifteen?" Tonks asked, her tone unchanging as she spoke without missing a beat. "Harry, I'd have been shocked if you had expected that."

"Well, did you?"

"Did I what?" Tonks retorted.

"Did you expect to be... you know, with me?" Harry pursued, his voice slightly unsteady as he looked her dead in the eyes.

For a long few seconds, Tonks looked into his eyes before looking down at the ground and sighing. "No, I... I never would have expected to do this. And does it feel weird... yeah, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't."

The knot in his gut had blossomed into full-fledged panic now, and Harry struggled for words. "Does... does that mean, you know –"

"Harry, just because it was your first time doesn't mean you were that bad," Tonks said, her voice forcibly light as she twirled her wand around her finger and nearly dropped it. "You haven't ruined men for me, if that's what you're asking."

"That wasn't really what I was asking," Harry said quietly.

"I know," Tonks replied, giving him a helpless shrug as she leaned against the wall. "Look, I never would have expected this or any feelings, or planned for them, or even dreamed of them... but it happened. And as much as I think about it, I can't explain it either – and believe me, I've tried to. But... but maybe that's the point, I guess. We can't know or explain everything. And besides, it wasn't like it felt bad or it hurt."

"No, not at all," Harry said quickly, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. From a few of the noises she made when I was with her, I wasn't sure. Whew.

"Truth be told, it's a little easier that you actually have a modicum of maturity," Tonks admitted with another shrug. "And sure, the age difference is a little strange, but magic's weird, and it helps I can always appear whatever age I want. If it makes you feel weird –"

"To be honest, I was amazed it was happening at all," Harry blurted. Immediately flushing scarlet, he hastily continued. "I mean, I felt like I was the luckiest guy on the planet."

Tonks laughed at that. "Damn right you did. Now come on, let's get over to Moody. Are you cool, Harry?"

Harry paused for a few seconds, but then nodded. "I think so. Even with the fight in Azkaban, I'm feeling a bit better. Moody taught me a few things to control my emotions so I don't become a wreck like after the Ministry fight."

"Guess I might need to reacquaint myself with these lessons," Tonks muttered under her breath, her darkening as she raised her wand and peered down the passage – but Harry had heard her, and was frowning again.

"Are you okay, Tonks? I mean, you can talk to me –"

"I appreciate that, Harry," Tonks replied with a small smile that didn't reach her eyes, "but I really need to talk to Moody. He's got more experience than both of us. We should really get moving."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, his eyes not leaving Tonks as she began walking down the narrow passageway. Why won't she talk to me... but then again, maybe I'm not qualified to help her with this sort of thing. Moody was her trainer... yeah, he's probably better helping her than me.

"Shit!"

"Easy," Harry advised, as Tonks scrabbled to brace herself against the wall. "It's slippery."

"No shit," Tonks replied with a snort.

"You know, I think I might have figured out why you like Glisseo so much."

He heard Tonks huff. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, it's because since you fall on your ass so often, you like seeing everyone else do the same," Harry replied with a wide smile.

She gave him an exasperated glare. "I'm not that clumsy."

"You nearly fell twice in this hall alone."

"It's slippery!"

"I didn't fall."

"Oh go fuck yourself."

"No thanks, I'd rather you do it."

Tonks paused and turned around slowly, a slightly bemused expression on her face. "You're getting better – I think I might be rubbing off on you. You know, you didn't use to have anything when

we talked – hell, I remember when you went all red when I was getting ready to break into Gringotts and I was 'enhancing' my figure."

"Well," Harry replied with an insufferable tone that mimicked Hermione's, "I have matured, after all."

"Okay then," Tonks said with a sudden , sidling close to Harry, her hands snaking around him. "Let's have some fun. Get dirty."

Harry could hardly believe it. "Are you serious?"

"Hell, I already made most of the metaphors," Tonks said, her eyes glinting brown as she undid the clasp of her cloak and tossed it against the opposite wall. "Let's put some truth to them."

Dean Thomas rubbed his eyes again as he stared at the page in front of him, trying desperately to focus on the complex Transfiguration formulas behind Vanishing. Even though every student in Hogwarts was lucky if they got an hour of sleep each night, the teachers hadn't chosen to lighten the workload.

Beside him, he heard a disgusted huff. Despite his own frustration, Dean let a small smile creep onto his face.

"Seamus, go get some sleep."

"Yeah, I'll get right on that," Seamus snapped. "The essay's due tomorrow, and I'm nearly –"

"I'll take a look at it," Dean reassured him, setting down his own pages of notes and picking up his Charms textbook. "Try and get an hour of sleep, though – I can't work with you huffing and swearing every few minutes."

Seamus stared at the paper for a few more seconds, and then tossed down his quill and gave his best friend a nod. "All right, thank you. Good luck parsing through that."

Dean nodded, and watched silently as Seamus slowly climbed the stairs, finally leaving the Gryffindor common room empty.

Except –

"There, he's gone, now we can talk."

Dean started, but then he quietly pulled his wand free and tapped himself on the head, whispering the words of the Disillusionment Charm as he watched himself blend with the shadowy chair where he had been sitting. Yet despite it, he felt a little rush of anger – it was annoying, really. And you'd think they'd care to check to see if I was even still here... or they just didn't even see me...

"I thought Dean was working over there," Hermione Granger said nervously, peering around the room from her spot with Ron Weasley by the fire. It was understandable why he might have missed them – he was sitting down, and there were a series of armchairs and tables and general debris blocking his line of sight. "I could have sworn he was –"

"He's not there, look?" Ron interrupted, a trace of annoyance in his voice. "He must have gone up earlier, he's not there now. Now what did you want to talk to me about?"

"The attacks, obviously," Hermione said in a low voice. "Ron, it's only a matter of time before there's another attack, and I don't want any more people to get hurt. And... and even though I was really scared before, that Malfoy was going to do something to us, with what happened with Ernie, Harry's already informed Moody about it, and that did a lot to assuage my fears."

"Yeah, and Moody's got my brothers working for him, trying to track down who's behind this," Ron said impatiently. "What's your point?"

"Ron, we both know Malfoy's involved," Hermione said urgently, leaning forward. "Probably Nott and Zabini too. And even though we don't know how the magic works, I bet we could get one of them to talk in the right circumstances."

But Ron was already shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I'm not doing Polyjuice Potion again – besides, considering how quickly the

attacks have come, I really don't think we would have time to brew the damn stuff again –"

Dean could hardly believe his ears – since when did Ron and Hermione (and he assumed, by extension Harry) brew Polyjuice Potion, and why?

"I'm not talking about Polyjuice Potion, Ron," Hermione said anxiously. "I'm suggesting something a little more daring – we need to lure one of them out, into a trap of some kind. Maybe," she added in a lower voice, so quiet that Dean had to strain to hear her, "maybe we should fake a message from You-Know-Who. We know that's where he's getting his orders."

Ron's eyes widened. "You're joking."

"It wouldn't be that difficult, Ronald!" Hermione said with a huff. "Here's my idea – we write up a message, make it look like it's been sent from, I don't know, a Death Eater or something – not from You-Know-Who himself. We say in the message that we're giving Malfoy additional supplies or something and we tell him to meet us at a specific location inside the school, and then when he shows up, we pounce on him, feed him Veritaserum, and convince him to talk!"

Dean frowned. It wasn't a bad plan by any stretch, but even he could see the problems – and from the look on his face, so did Ron.

"What if all three show up to the meeting – you know, as good as we are, Hermione, I'm not sure we're that good. Or what if Malfoy sees through the ruse?"

"If he sees through the letter, it's not like we've made things worse," Hermione said impatiently. "And if all three of them show up, if we catch them by surprise, we can nab all three of them and get answers quickly."

"Assuming they don't set spirits on the lot of us," Ron muttered uneasily. "Moody's not going to agree with this, you know. It's too risky – we don't know what kind of magic is behind this, Hermione, or how they're even summoning these ghosts."

"Look," Hermione said tersely, "if Malfoy is stupid enough to get goaded into getting dunked in Harry's acid cauldron – which didn't help Harry's cause in the least –"

"The ferret deserved it," Ron said, a surprising note of savagery in his voice. "Bastard."

"But if he was stupid enough to try goading Harry, it's a reasonable assumption that if we're offering him something, he'll at least be intrigued enough to pursue us," Hermione finished with a sigh. "Well, what do you think?"

"I don't think Malfoy's going to fall for the bait," Ron said tiredly, getting to his feet. "He's stupid, but he's not that stupid... and if he traces the letter back –"

"Ron, please – if he is taking orders from You-Know-Who, more people could die –"

Ron's eyes flashed. "Yeah, and right now, considering I've lost a brother, I really don't want to lose another one. Or a sister!" Ron caught himself before he raised his voice much more, but it was a near thing. "Look," he began much more quietly, "I want to help, Hermione, but I'm worried about Ginny and the twins. Hogwarts isn't safe anymore, not for anyone. If I knew there was a way we could keep them safe and go after Malfoy, it would be a lot easier, but these attacks are hitting innocent people. Hell, after Harry dunked Malfoy in acid, that Lovegood girl got attacked, and she was reportedly close to Harry, closer than either of us."

"And doesn't that say something," Hermione muttered, crossing her arms over her chest. "I really thought you'd be more on my side with this, Ron –"

"I am on your side, Hermione!"

"Then why won't you help me?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't!" Ron retorted heatedly. "I just have more to lose, okay?" He picked up his books and stacked his papers precariously on top of them. "Look, I understand that you want to do something, and if you come up with a plan that keeps everyone safe and sane, I'll be more than willing to go with it, especially if it gives me a shot at Malfoy – just be careful, okay?"

"Wait, Ron –"

But Ron had already gone up the stairs to the boys' dormitories, leaving Hermione seething by the fire and Dean alone with his thoughts.

He could see her approaching him, her naked, sensuous body moving beautifully against the candle light, her straight dark-brown hair cascading down her pale back...

He couldn't help but stifle a small smile as he shrugged off his robes and took her by the hand, beginning to guide her to the silken bed only a few paces away... but she took a firmer grip, guiding him towards the bathroom, finished with white and black marble.

He felt her hand caressing the small of his back, slowly creeping up his shoulder blades, climbing up to his neck...

And then her grip hardened.

And with horrifying strength, she brought him down towards the toilet – except it wasn't a toilet, but a glass cauldron, filled with bubbling aquamarine acid –

"Fuck!"

He snapped awake and flung himself out of bed, making a desperate run for the bathroom and the toilet.

But the churning bile was rising in his throat – he could taste it in his mouth...

Malfoy didn't make it to the toilet. Instead, he bent over the sink and expelled the contents of his stomach without any grace or dignity.

Wiping the sweat from his face, he looked down at the sink and almost retched again. Turning quickly, he darted back into the bedroom, retrieved his wand, and hastily Vanished the puddle of vomit clogging the sink drain.

He looked up, and in the dirty mirror, he couldn't help but recoil from his reflection. His once-perfect features now marred with twisted white scars. They had gotten a bit better in the few weeks since the accident, but they were still very visible. And no matter what spell or enchantment he tried to conceal or fix the scars, nothing seemed to work with any permanence.

He was a nightmare... he had given his face to this cause...

"Draco."

Malfoy looked down in the sink, not bothering to turn and look at Zabini, who was standing in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. "Go away, Blaise."

"We need to talk."

"Leave me alone, Blaise –"

There were footsteps, and suddenly Malfoy felt himself being pulled around to face Blaise's terse, edgy expression. "I said need, Draco, and that means we're not waiting," he growled.

Malfoy shoved Zabini's hand off of him. "What, then?"

"I think we might have a little problem with Nott."

"Nott's always been a problem –"

"Not like this," Zabini growled, grabbing Malfoy and pulling him by the arm into the dormitory, towards Nott's shadowed bed.

"I don't want to see –"

"I don't care," Zabini snapped, "you're going to see this."

He tore back the curtains, and Malfoy took a hasty step backwards, as he beheld Theodore Nott.

Much to Malfoy's relief, he was not nude – in fact, he was still in his school robes, even his shoes. His hair was tangled and matted, but Malfoy had been exposed to that particular travesty for as long as he could remember.

But it was his face that made Malfoy's gut churn. Nott's jaw was clenched and contorted in a grimace, his eyes were wide-open and yet unseeing, and the veins in his neck were bulging horribly. He looked as if he was locked in the throes of terrible pain from the Cruciatus Curse... a curse that would never end...

"He's going insane," Zabini said coldly, shutting the curtains abruptly and shielding Nott from the rest of the dormitory. "There's no denying that now. Hope you understand now why the Dark Lord chose him instead of you – clearly, you got the better bargain."

"And I lost my face for it," Malfoy snapped bitterly.

"At least you still have your mind, you conceited shit!" Zabini hissed angrily. "But we have a problem on our hands – I've been watching Nott over the past few days and there's a very real concern that his... instability will make him a liability, unable to follow the Dark Lord's orders."

"If Nott loses his mind, I'm fairly certain he'll be capable of the magic," Malfoy said crisply. "There are plenty of insane people in the Dark Lord's service."

"But his degeneration will make him easily spotted as a suspect, Draco," Zabini replied in a very low voice. "And if we want the magic to remain controlled, as the Dark Lord told us was vital, we need to ensure Nott maintains a modicum of sanity, and that means the

attacks need to fall back into a regular pattern. Whatever was tried with Macmillian hasn't helped –"

"Nott told me what was required for that particular attack required two stages!" Malfoy retorted. "Nott just needs to activate the second stage!"

"It's out of order –"

"Then you contact the Dark Lord and get us targets that fit, Blaise!" Malfoy snarled. "By that logic the next attack should be a Gryffindor – and yet from everything Nott has told me, the Gryffindor ghosts or those tied to the house in some manner have proven most uncooperative."

"Then we might have to think outside the box," Blaise replied, turning away from Malfoy. "I'll have Nott send a message to the Dark Lord tomorrow morning – in the mean time, we need to keep his instability concealed, got it?"

"Fine, fine," Malfoy replied exasperatedly, turning away and moving back towards his own bed.

"Malfoy."

"What?"

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself." Zabini threw a meaningful glance at Nott's bed. "I think we both know by now that for us, it could be much worse."

The crisp, cool air of fresh winter snow, the slight wetness of snowflakes against his face, the scent of... well, anything that wasn't the chill reek of rot and death...

Yes, it is good to be free... and such a shame that I'm alone to see it...

"Antonin!"

Antonin Dolohov turned from his spot leaning against the balcony and bowed mockingly. "Ah, Bella, good to see you back at the manor. How was the, ah, excavation of Castle Lestrangle?"

"Ongoing, and this is not your manor," Bellatrix Lestrangle said icily, her eyes blazing with utter contempt. "To suggest otherwise –"

"Bella's, it's not Nott's manor anymore either," Antonin said with a smirk, running his hand over his newly trimmed beard as he sauntered up towards Bellatrix. "I think it's more of the Dark Lord's manor now –"

Bella's eyes flashed. "Speak with such insouciance of the Dark Lord again, and I will sever your tongue and have the house elves cook it myself. I've always wanted to savour the tongue of an ass."

Antonin cocked an eyebrow as he cracked a slightly bemused smirk. "And how long did it take you to come up with that line, Bellatrix? Guess you did something in Azkaban other than mercilessly fucking your husband and his brother."

Bellatrix's eyes hardened. "Move. We are summoned."

Antonin straightened and drew his wand, his expression instantly becoming serious. "He is in the laboratory?" he asked, walking next to her as they ducked inside.

"He hasn't left," Bellatrix said, and Antonin detected with amusement the timbre of awe and barely restrained lust in her voice as they descended the stairs into the muted opulence of the foyer. "The magic harvested from the Spire... while incomplete, it only magnifies his power..."

Shame none of us will get to see it... no, best not think those thoughts around Bellatrix, not while she's in heat from newfound freedom...

"So why us?" Antonin asked instead, his mild tone completely unrevealing of anything except curiosity.

"Why you, I would find a more appropriate question," Bellatrix snapped as Antonin graciously opened the door and then proceeded to step right in front of the witch as she attempted to step through it. "I would hardly find a crass excuse for a wizard like you with enough favour in his eyes –"

"I was actually referring to you, because I have information," Antonin interrupted, smugness leaking into his voice as they descended the narrow spiral stairwell. "What do you have to offer him, Bella?"

Her expression was so similar to that of his Regina, he nearly paused in his tracks. So passionate, so full of fire... but then a look in her eyes told him all that he needed to know – the fire was still from burning sulphur, and the unquenchably dangerous instability had not gone anywhere.

And now she was free to wreak all manner of hell on the wizarding world again.

And apparently, Antonin noted with a growing triumphant smile, she was stymied by a simple question.

"Information," she finally hissed. "Valuable to his efforts."

"Oh, I certainly hope so," Antonin said lightly. "I wouldn't want you to go the way of your sister and her husband."

Before Bellatrix could snarl a retort, they had reached the door, a great mahogany barrier with a skull and snake carved across the smooth finish.

"Enter," the high-pitched hiss reached their ears the second their left hands touched the door. Once again, Antonin opened the door for Bellatrix, this time allowing her to precede him into the room – after all, he could be magnanimous in victory.

The laboratory was surprisingly well lit, candles floating and strewn throughout the room, all emitting a different colour of lights. Books were scattered across the tables in a madness that Antonin knew was methodical beyond his comprehension. Dozens of potions

sparkled in their flasks or were suspended in midair devoid of container, forming arcs of liquid and steam, frozen not in temperature but time.

And in the middle of the room, where a massive, obscenely complex sprawl of glowing symbols twisted together in a design that defied natural geometry, stood Lord Voldemort.

"Bella, Antonin," Voldemort said quietly, never taking his eyes away from the magical snarl of an Arithmancy equation, "I appreciate your adroitness in your response."

Bellatrix bowed low, and Antonin did the same, albeit for very different reasons than Bellatrix. She revered the Dark Lord as a god amongst men – he simply regarded him as an extremely powerful wizard worthy of his respect and service, and his most likely ally in the termination of those who had ruined his life.

"I have read your reports on the events in Azkaban," Voldemort continued, in the same, almost-distracted voice, twirling his wand and driving the floating mass of equations downwards onto a waiting piece of paper. "And I find them both quite... interesting, to say the least, for they suggest an additional force that the Ministry or Dumbledore dispatched to Azkaban."

"I believe there may be some cross-over in that area, my Lord," Antonin said in a low voice. "It would explain the appearances of the Hit Wizards, and the rescue of Dmitri Kemester."

"Which you aided."

"In order to gather more information and potentially identify and neutralize most of the strike team," Antonin said with a shrug. "Which I did. Shacklebolt, Kemester, Larshall, Sanders, Tonks... and another witch that was not named."

Bellatrix suddenly turned to Antonin. "An unidentified witch?" she hissed, with sudden interest. "Dark hair, spells of –"

"Disturbing potency?" Voldemort finished, his red eyes slits. "Yes, she was mentioned in both of your reports – and she intrigues me. An information source from the Ministry has placed her in at the scene of the Ministry attack seven weeks ago – apparently in the company of Harry Potter."

Bellatrix suddenly looked far more interested. "A little girl, working with that half-blood to defy us? Who is –"

"You say 'apparently', my Lord," Antonin interrupted, a slight frown crossing his face. "Why?"

"Because all of my spies have given no information of this woman," Voldemort said, his voice icy. "And while she appears young, the strength of her magic implies something different entirely. I suspect the Order has a plot that we must unravel – even despite Dumbledore's absence."

"On that note, my Lord, another owl from the Italians was received by Nott today," Bellatrix spoke up, her voice thick with anger. "They have the utter gall to threaten –"

Voldemort was expressionless. "Let them bluster. They have no power here, and no courage to confront me here. But the Italians, as annoying as they might be, are not my concern at the moment. Bellatrix, I need more details of your encounter with this woman."

Antonin wisely took a step back.

"Legilimens!"

The spell hit Bellatrix like a saucepan, and she fell to her knees, her eyes glassy with lustful adoration as the Dark Lord concentrated, his wand pointed directly at the witch and shaking of its own accord in his hands...

And just as quickly as he began it, Voldemort ended the spell. Despite himself, Antonin was a little disconcerted at the slightly perplexed expression on the Dark Lord's face – as if something very strange, and yet very likely, had become apparent to the Dark Lord...

"He called her 'Harry'," he murmured, his eyes shadowed as he turned to look at one of the arcs of liquid. "A strange name... unless..."

He called her 'Harry'... who is 'he', and why did he... Antonin frowned, absent-mindedly declining a hand to Bellatrix as she struggled to her feet.

"I don't see it, my Lord," he confessed.

Suddenly, the Dark Lord whirled, and pointed his wand at a bookshelf in the far corner of the room. Without a word, a book materialized in his hand, and Voldemort set it on the table. Another wave of his wand had the book open and frozen to a page, and the Dark Lord scanned the text, memorizing it instantly.

"Perhaps," the Dark Lord whispered, "but it is daring... and dangerous... and yet it would explain so much..."

"My Lord," Bellatrix breathed, still trying to catch her breath from the Dark Lord's visit to her mind. "What is that book?"

"One of the two copies of The Book of Inversion and Duplex," Voldemort replied, "written hundreds of years ago by a wizard who dared not sign his name to either book. The ideas were years ahead of their time, but obscene in their complexity – and useless to those without the knowledge or the desire to pursue its magic.

"Or," he continued, closing the book softly, "without the necessary notes necessarily compiled from other sources. Notes even I have never seen, that I chose not to read due to the gross limitations of the magic I believed Harry Potter has attempted to utilize... but notes that could have been made available, by either of Harry Potter's backers."

"Dumbledore," Bellatrix growled through clenched teeth.

"Not just him," Voldemort said quietly. "And the presence, Bella, of the mutated half-blood Auror in all of this only reinforces my

hypothesis. It appears that Potter is indeed a player in this game after all."

"I assume you speak of Nymphadora Tonks," Antonin asked, his mind racing and trying in vain to follow the Dark Lord's train of thought. "But what could she have contributed?"

"Blood of a Metamorphmagus," Voldemort said, giving his wand an experimental twirl. Suddenly, magical characters erupted into the air and merged into a complex mass of Arithmancy that Antonin didn't even dare approach, much less understand. "And the necessary spells to activate the magic. But corpses would have been required..."

And a few seconds later, a slash of Voldemort's wand Vanished the symbols, revealing a cruel grin growing on the Dark Lord's face.

"Aphrodite Zabini... and Lucy Warrington," Voldemort whispered triumphantly. "Both killed in Potter's presence, if not by his very hand. The pieces fit – and reveal a weakness I enhanced months ago for entirely different reasons. A rare opportunity now presents itself."

By this point, Antonin knew the Dark Lord had long lost him, but he didn't care – he suspected he was going to get a mission which would please him greatly. "What would you have us do, my Lord?" he asked.

"At this point, your roles will be simple," Voldemort replied calmly, waving his wand and conjuring a stiff piece of parchment with a list of titles written neatly upon it. "You are to find these works in the accumulated libraries of the Death Eaters, and retrieve them regardless of protest. Inform them they will be justly compensated, and deal with any resistance."

"And I, my Lord?" Bellatrix asked, her eyes wild with exhilaration.

"Very simple, Bella," Voldemort replied, his lipless smile growing. "You will work with me on a solitary task – the complete annihilation of Harry Potter's mortal soul."

Author's Note - so, this chapter took far longer than I thought it would, and ended up being longer than I thought it would. But regardless, here it is. And warnings for violence and extremely disturbing content near the end of the chapter. And as always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy.

"And then we arrived here," Tonks finished, leaning heavily against the chair opposite her mentor's desk. "And Harry stepped out the room to get the Pensieve, and –"

"I get it, Tonks," Moody growled, examining the two ectoplasmic tools Cassane had given Harry and Tonks with a critical eye. "I've used models similar to these before when there was a nasty possession in York the Death Eaters orchestrated in the First War - I can see the Unspeakables changed the design..."

"They look better constructed, I can tell you that," Tonks said, gesturing wearily at the tools as she took a seat. "Reinforced for stability and durability."

"About damn time the Unspeakables began taking advice from us," Moody said with a disgruntled snort. "And it only happens when I'm retired – typical. Merlin only knows they'd need qualified Aurors right now..."

"They..." Tonks ran a hand through her hair, which went slate grey. "Look, I'm not going to lie and say we're not understaffed, but the Order needs you here, Alastor."

Moody gave a snort as he set the ectoplasmic tools back on the desk. "Of course it does – without Dumbledore or even Snape, we're understaffed here as well. I'm assuming that we've heard nothing from either of them?"

"Nothing from Dumbledore, nothing from Snape," Tonks said tiredly. "Nothing from Lupin either – nobody knows what's happening there. A lot of us are guessing he's deep undercover with the werewolves, but nothing's been confirmed."

"And I'm assuming Kingsley's not going to be getting an Order of Merlin, First Class, for fighting Voldemort himself at Azkaban?" Moody growled, his wooden leg thumping rhythmically as he paced over to where his wall was increasingly plastered with notes and scribbled diagrams.

"As much as any of us..." Tonks paused, unable to stifle her yawn any longer. "Sorry, but as much as any of us might deserve it, nobody at the Ministry is saying a damn word – although it's only a matter of time before Fudge chooses to see reason."

"You're exhausted," Moody interjected sharply, his eyes narrowing. "When was the last time you slept, Auror?"

"I dunno," Tonks retorted, trying desperately not to rub her eyes. "Thirty-six, thirty-eight hours ago, I think?"

"You think?"

"Hey, when there's time sinks, you can't be sure of –"

"That's not what I meant, Tonks, and you know it."

Tonks closed her eyes and put her hand to her head. "I know, I know. If you must know, I haven't slept since Azkaban."

"Your constant vigilance is compromised if you're not able to be fully alert, Tonks," Moody growled. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Would you believe me if I said I haven't had a chance?" Tonks retorted sarcastically.

"No."

"Figures," Tonks muttered. Her hair faded to matte black and lengthened several inches as she strained to pull the shadows away from her eyes.

"Don't even try to make it look like you aren't as downright exhausted as you are," Moody said, a note of disappointment in his voice. "Did something happen at Azkaban?"

"Yes," Tonks said through clenched teeth.

"Have you allowed yourself to unwind, to clinically analyze the situation –"

"I really can't do that easily this time, Alastor," Tonks snapped, her voice biting as she pulled herself to her feet.

"And here I thought Potter's stupidity wasn't infectious – apparently, though, it's sexually transmitted."

Tonks fought to keep the redness from her face as she rounded on her mentor. She could hardly believe what he had just said – was he really implying – what gave him the right –

"What, are you angry with me because I 'just don't understand', or because it's the truth?" Moody spat, his mismatched eyes glaring with full intensity at his protégée. "You do know what happened with Potter after his little misadventure in Potions?"

"He told me –"

"He was goaded, Tonks, by a bit of narcissistic Death Eater discharge that doesn't deserve the air he breathes," Moody said in a low voice. "Is that it? Did you allow yourself to be goaded?"

"He was –"

"DID YOU?"

Tonks stared Moody with hatred. "Yes."

"And what did you suffer for it?"

"Multiple cracked ribs, a shattered hand, broken nose..." Tonks spat. "And... and goddamn it, Alastor, he tried to rape me!"

Moody's eyes went hard as diamond. "And I'm only assuming you did not immediately report yourself in for a St. Mungo's counselling session?"

"You think I have time for that –"

"Yes, you damn well do!" Moody shouted, slamming his fist on the desk. "Tonks, it's Auror procedure you undergo a psychological consultation at St. Mungo's after attacks of a mental or sexual nature, or in the case of extreme uses of the Dark Arts! I was one of the Aurors that helped put in that regulation, and I'll be damned if my best protégée feels that she doesn't need –"

"I don't want any Ministry Healer anywhere near my brain!" Tonks yelled, her temper finally breaking, all of the frustration and fury rushing out. "Despite the fact that Dumbledore fought so hard to get Metamorphmagi treated as human beings, most people haven't gotten the message - and I will not be analyzed like a fucking Muggle science experiment!"

She didn't even notice for a few seconds that her hair had gone matte black, and she didn't know her eyes were now a vivid green, but from the strange look on Moody's face, she could tell that he was suspecting something was amiss.

"Tonks, I helped put that regulation in place for your own good," Moody said, his teeth gritted as he fought to control his own temper. "I'm trying to make sure you're not going to hurt yourself or others if a situation like this happens again. Right now, I can't force you to submit yourself to the session – believe me, if I wasn't stuck here, I'd be dragging you in myself –"

"I'm sorry, then," Tonks snarled. "Is that what you want? I just don't want the Healers – and by extension, the Ministry – poking around inside my head right now. I don't want to be directed to the same mental wings of St. Mungo's where Dmitri Kemester is going to end up, and you can bloody bet that if Umbridge got a hold of my file, I'd be locked in a Cushioning-Charmed cell in an hour."

She held Moody's gaze for a long five seconds before Moody made a disappointed noise and turned back to his wall of papers. "So what did you do to the man?"

"I killed him," Tonks replied steadily. "Wilson was an Auror, so I was planning on giving him a merciful passing, but Sturgis blew my cover and I ran out of options."

"You didn't even consider asking for a surrender?"

"Alastor, he was treating me like property," Tonks growled between clenched teeth. "He would never surrender to me, what the fuck was I supposed to do?"

"So how did you kill him, then?" Moody growled.

"In the fight, I gouged out his eyes and set him on fire."

Moody clenched his jaw, and it was clear that at that very moment he wanted to fly into a tirade, ripping her defiant face to pieces, but he restrained himself.

"Well," he said stiffly, after a long tense few seconds of silence, "no wonder you can't sleep."

Tonks' eyes went wide. "How dare you –"

Moody whirled around. "Don't even, Tonks," he growled, his raspy tone brooking absolutely no argument. "Don't even. You know the rules – just because Crouch lightened our regulations in the First War, gave us license to use Unforgivables, doesn't mean it's right. Doesn't mean it was ever right. Doesn't mean I don't expect more from my best student. Aurors don't torture, Tonks – I thought you remembered that."

"I didn't torture him," Tonks said in a low voice.

"No, you only blinded him, set him on fire, and left him to die," Moody retorted. "Sometimes our job is brutal, I understand that. I also

understand, Tonks, that there are times when we must kill or be killed, but those times are never a license for sadism."

She didn't have an answer to that.

"So," Moody said after a long few seconds of silence, as he turned to face Tonks while his magical eye looked through the back of his head to scan the wall, "are you going to tell me what the hell you and Potter have been experimenting with?"

She had been dreading this question for a long time, and she knew she didn't have a good answer – she was having a hard enough time justifying all of it to herself, and without rest, she knew she wouldn't be able to put together a rational explanation.

"I can't, Alastor."

"Do you not trust me?"

"Dumbledore knows, if that makes you feel any better."

"Dumbledore's not here."

Tonks put her fingers to her temple, trying to stave off the blossoming headache. "Alastor, I don't want to go into it. It's dangerous, really complicated, and right now, I'm too damned tired to explain it all to you in the level of detail you'd want."

"More reason why you should get some sleep," Moody growled. "I'm going to want the truth, Auror, and I don't care how ugly it is."

"Fine," Tonks exclaimed, tossing her hand up the air with exasperation. "You'll get it when I'm articulate enough to talk about it, okay?"

"I don't like that tone."

"Good."

There were two steps, and before Tonks knew it, Moody was standing inches away from her, his breath smelling strangely like stale onions. "Listen," he began in a low voice, "I know you've been with Harry, and frankly, I don't really care. After what he's done and what has been done to him, I can consider him an adult – and apparently, so can you. And I know that Dumbledore knew about and tolerated the collaboration between you and Potter, because he thought it would be beneficial for all of us – much to my ongoing scepticism. But one thing I won't let you do is regress – or do something stupid because of him. Potter's getting better, but he's far from perfect."

"I know that," Tonks said curtly, crossing her arms over her chest. "What's your point?"

"You've been a good influence on him," Moody said, his voice edged. "Don't let him be a bad influence on you."

Harry set the Pensieve down on Moody's desk with trepidation. "Professor, with all due respect –"

"I understand your concern regarding the time fluctuation, Potter," Moody said gruffly. "Rest assured, I understand."

"Then why are you insisting on seeing these memories too?" Harry asked exasperatedly. "The second I mentioned that Cassane had given me anything –"

"Potter, I've waited over fifteen years for the answers that are likely contained within that vial," Moody said roughly. "Moreover, I saw men ruined, lose their lives – or souls – because of some of the actions in the First War that were never explained. Answers were never given, the whole truth was never known, and certain people behaved in ways I never could explain. Inside that vial could be whole, untainted grimy truth, and I will be damned before I let that truth slip away from me again."

"So, in other words," Tonks said with a sigh, "is that all three of us are taking a look."

"Right," Moody said curtly, wordlessly Summoning the vial straight from Harry's fingers. "Now let's not waste any more time."

The silvery memories flowed sluggishly into the Pensieve, and after a few expert prods with his wand, Moody nodded with satisfaction.

Then, without warning, he grabbed Tonks' and Harry's arms and pulled.

Harry felt his face contact the chill silvery material, and then he was falling and falling and falling and...

He was standing in an office – a Ministry office, by the looks of it, and a rather nice one at that. The wood paneling seemed new, and the carpet seemed relatively clean. One wall of the office was lined with books, and the other, strangely, by what looked like tacky Ministry recruitment posters, spaced around clipped articles from the Daily Prophet. The back wall, opposite the door, was taken up by a massive window, shrouded by curtains that looked rather filmy and light compared to most heavy velvet curtains that seemed to be the mainstay in the wizarding world.

And in the center of the room was a desk. Well made, yet exceedingly simple in designs, papers were strewn across it in neat piles, each held down by a glass paperweight.

Sitting at that desk was a much-younger Nathan Cassane.

His hair was a rich dark brown, and a bit longer than in the present. He wore a classy suit, almost Muggle in appearance, but with the hems a little longer to indicate that they could be considered robes – albeit of a very unusual style. Interestingly, despite his very professional clothing, his tie was loose around his collar, he was leaning back in his chair (reading the Daily Prophet, by the looks of it), and his brown eyes were glinting. And a simple golden band was around his ring finger – a ring Harry never recalled seeing.

Harry caught a date on the edge of the Prophet. "July 29th, 1978," he said aloud.

"Sounds about right," Moody said coolly, both his eyes whizzing in their sockets as they sought to take in anything and everything about the room. "The war was heating up."

Without warning, there was a knock on the door. It seemed to be a knock Cassane was expected, because he smiled and said loudly, his voice strong and clear, "Come in."

The door opened, and Harry sucked in a breath – he was looking at his father.

James could have been mistaken for Harry's brother. His eyes were hazel, his nose was a little longer, his hair was a little wilder, but for all intents and purposes, he was Harry's splitting image, the few years in age leaving little difference.

Or maybe it's because the past few months have aged me, he thought to himself.

Tonks nudged Harry in the ribs. "He's cute."

"Shut up."

"So, you wanted to see me, sir?" James asked earnestly.

"Yes, James, sit down," Cassane said with a warm smile, rising, setting down the paper and shaking James' hand vigorously. "And dispense with all that 'sir' crap – I've known you and your family for years."

"But if you're going to be my boss, don't I have to respect the, uh, chain of command?" James asked, frowning slightly.

"You sound like an Auror trainee under Alastor," Cassane remarked with a wink. "I'm not nearly so formal, James. And neither is my team. We tend to get things done more quickly in my group, with a lot less... paperwork. Oh, don't worry," he added, seeing the brightening look on James' face, "there's still plenty of it, but we have a certain amount of... leeway, in what we can get accomplished."

"Your training is a lot faster, that's to be sure," James said, rubbing the back of his neck with a wince. "Pretty hard, too."

"We live in a hard world, James," Cassane said seriously, "and what we do, while requiring less training, requires other things as well. We are a team that gathers information for prosecution of Death Eaters, compiling evidence, collecting details from witnesses, and if – and only if – we have enough information, make surgical strikes."

"Surgical strikes," James said, a smile breaking on his face. "I like the sound of that – on Death Eaters?"

"Not... not precisely," Cassane said, seemingly weighing every word. "While we are technically permitted to make arrests... given the current situation in the Ministry... well, I'm sure you've seen the casualty reports..."

"I see them daily in the Prophet –"

"Fortunately for the wizarding world, the Daily Prophet doesn't know half of the story," Cassane said quietly, nudging the folded paper with the tips of his fingers. "Unfortunately, I know more – and believe me when I say this: none of the unreported information is good."

James shifted uneasily in his chair, and his grin faded a little bit, but he raised his chin up. "I can handle it, sir."

"And that's one of the reasons why I called you in here, James," Cassane continued, leaning forward and leafing through a stack of neat papers, each clipped with a small moving photograph. "I have the report on your progress here, James, both from the physical and magical training, and the psychological evaluation."

"Was that last part really all that necessary?" James asked with a bit of confusion. "I mean, I'm normal. Damn near exceptional in some spots..." He winced. "Sorry, old habit –"

"James, it's the truth," Cassane said seriously, setting down the paper and folding his hands. "You passed all the tests and training with flying colours, and I wish I could accept you onto our team."

James let out a whoop. "Yes! I made it! I... wait, what?" His eyes went wide, and his smile was abruptly gone. "What do you mean, you wish you could accept me? I'm available!"

"James, this isn't about availability or ability and you know it," Cassane said with a frustrated sigh. To Harry, the man looked like he was talking around a subject – a very touchy subject. "It's something different."

"What are you –"

"How's Charlus doing, James?"

Most of the colour left James' face, and he visibly swallowed hard. "He's... Dad hasn't gotten better, if that's what you're asking," he replied, a note of pain and helplessness creeping into his voice. "He's still sick, just like he was when you visited at my Hogwarts graduation party. The Healers say... they say..."

"The magical consumption is getting worse?" Cassane asked sombrely.

James nodded, and Harry felt a surprising lump in his throat. I didn't even know my grandparents... they must have died before I was born... oh Dad, I'm sorry you're going through this...

Suddenly, he turned to Moody. "Magical consumption – that's what Claudius Kemester has!"

Moody nodded darkly. "Terrible disease, and worst of all, the Healers can't do anything to slow or stop it. It consumes your magic, and then consumes you. Terrible way to die."

"James," Cassane began, rising to his feet and crouching next to James, slumped in his chair, "your father was the older brother I never had. Our families have always been very close, and I hope you can understand why I can't accept you into the team. What if something were to happen to you, and I had to tell Charlus? Dorea's passing last year nearly killed him – if something were to happen to

you, you can't ask me to have the responsibility of giving him the killing blow."

"But nothing will happen to me!" James exclaimed with frustration, and Harry was astounded to see his father fighting back tears – tears that had began to form the instant Cassane had mentioned the name of his grandmother – James' mother. "You know I'm better – hell, I'm one of the best damn trainees in your squad, and you know Dad was fine with me joining the Aurors! Hell, take a look at their casualty rates!"

"It's not just the danger, James," Cassane said, rising to his feet and walking behind his desk, facing the window.

"Then... then what?" James asked with confusion.

"This squad, while receiving the implicit support and funding of the Ministry, is not known to the wizarding public," Cassane said quietly. "If it was, this team would be disbanded – and most of the team, likely including myself, would be in Azkaban."

James paled, and for a moment, Harry instantly recognized the expression on his father's face – it was an expression of mingled of doubt and fear, with unease about what he was choosing to do. "I thought..."

"The family name would be blackened for years," Cassane said quietly. "People wouldn't understand what you've done or tried to do. You would be snubbed, neglected, feared, even hated by those who know even a half truth about us. Fortunately, we have a degree of secrecy, but if that slips..." His voice trailed off as he turned around to face James. "My team, all of us, know the risk, and we are prepared to take it in order to bring down Voldemort and his cult of filth, but you..." Cassane sighed, and for a moment, looked terrifyingly human, his face lined and filled with indecision. Normally his eyes gleamed with magic, giving him presence, but now to Harry's eyes, he seemed like a middle-aged father, speaking to a young man who he treated as a son. "I don't want the Potter name blackened, James. I can't do that to Charlus – or to you. Do you understand?"

James was silent for a long few seconds, and then looked up, a desperate look on his face. "Your team... you think they're doing the right thing, right?"

"As often as they – as we – can."

"And I trust your judgment," James said, getting to his own feet. "And so will Dad. He doesn't care about reputation, sir, you know that. And... and to be honest, sir, nothing would make him happier than me working with you." James blinked twice and rubbed the edge of his glasses. "Call it... repaying an old debt."

"There's no debt to be paid, James," Cassane said with a sad shake of his head.

"Dad's told a different story."

Cassane shook his head again. "I need to tell him to stop mentioning me whenever he tells that story – he wooed your... your mother out of the Blacks on his own. All I really gave him was a bit of a nudge."

"It was important," James retorted, taking a deep breath as he fought to control his emotions – an expression Harry was very familiar with.

"I was ten," Cassane replied with an irritated wave his hand. "I was irrelevant to that story."

"Well, even so, I think Dad would be happier if I worked with you over the Aurors," James continued doggedly. "At least you'd fight like hell to keep me safe."

Cassane looked at James for a long few seconds, and Harry saw the older man taking several deep breaths of his own.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That's very... very true."

And then it changed.

The memory seemed to dissolve beneath Harry's feet, and he instinctively looked for something to grab onto, but before he knew it, he was on solid ground again – and in a very different memory.

The room he was in was large and very loud, filled with a cacophony of music and chatter. The room looked very ornate, with polished marble floors, fluted columns, and rich paintings decorating the heavily embossed walls. And yet despite its size, the room still felt hot and crowded, filled with people dancing or sitting at a slew of tables talking and drinking and laughing.

He spotted Tonks almost instantly and gestured to move to the side of the room, where it was a little less crowded. He squinted to see Cassane as he slid silently through the richly dressed crowd... he had to be there somewhere...

"Where are we?" Tonks called out loudly, pulling Harry up the few stairs to the slightly elevated sitting area. "Alastor?"

But even as Moody was rising up the stairs, he paused, and stiffened with sudden recognition.

"I remember this."

"What?"

"This was a Ministry function celebrating the inauguration of Millicent Bagnold as Minister for Magic after Athanasius Acontine stepped down," Moody said roughly. "And Cassane was here... and so was Scrimgeour..."

Moody's eyes snapped up. "We need to get outside." He pointed at the far doors on the other side of the room, slightly ajar and open to the night. "Cassane will be going out there... and if this is what I suspect..."

They cut through the crowd with surprising speed, with Moody making surprising time with wooden leg. It was made significantly easier by the fact that they could pass through the crowd like smoke,

but Harry still felt unnerved whenever he passed right through someone, and opted more often than not to step around them.

"There he is!" Tonks called, pointing at a figure slipping out the door. Harry immediately recognized Cassane's robes, which seemed to mimic a Muggle tuxedo in everything but cut – but unlike his initial meeting with James, Cassane didn't look nearly as happy. In fact, he looked downright irritated.

"Come on, let's move!" Moody snapped, shoving Tonks and Harry through the door as they stepped onto the balcony. Harry immediately noticed the differing atmosphere – the sounds of the music were muted instantly, and he could see the dozen cloaked figures standing on guard around the semicircular balcony.

Despite himself, Harry shivered. The wind was quite chill, and a few dead leaves were strewn around the railing. It felt like it was late November.

"This had better be damn good," Cassane said immediately, upon closing the oaken door behind him and glowering at the few richly dressed individuals standing together by the marble rail. "I don't get enough time with my wife as it is, and the last thing I need is –"

"Easy there, Nathan," one of the men replied, his voice clipped and almost nasal in its businesslike tone. "I wouldn't pull you away from Cassandra if it wasn't absolutely necessary –"

Harry knew that voice. He stepped into better light, and couldn't help but feel his stomach lurch. It was Bartemius Crouch Senior, and from the gleam of exultant righteous fire in his eyes, he was at the height of his power. His robes were elegant and fit well on his muscled frame, and his expression was clear and determined – the best possible leader

And yet I remember seeing raving and out of his mind, Harry thought to himself, his stomach still uneasy as he moved even closer. There was another cloaked figure, and Harry squinted to get a better look at the man – he certainly seemed familiar...

"Nevertheless, I thought you were on the Parkinson case tonight," Cassane said suspiciously, wordlessly pulling a bottle of wine and a trio of glasses out of thin air with a tiny flick of his wand. "Wine?"

"Summoned or Conjured?" Crouch asked lightly.

Cassane snorted. "Conjured – I'm not that good at Summoning, Barty."

"Then no thank you, then," Crouch declined politely with a slight shake of his head. "I find Conjured wine lacks body... you don't get the same richness of flavour –"

"I'm not a wine connoisseur, Barty, just trying to be polite," Cassane replied with a shrug. "Besides, I'm more of a scotch person anyways, and you'd never conjure something like that... what about you, Rufus?"

"I'd rather stay sober tonight," Rufus Scrimgeour growled, pulling back his hood to reveal a heavily scarred, albeit younger face. His tawny hair was neatly trimmed, and looked surprisingly well-groomed – although standing next to Crouch's rigidly straight parting, it almost appeared unkempt. "This isn't a night for drinking, but business."

"Tell that to the people inside," Cassane replied with a snort. "I swear, I think Antonin's trying to match Horace drink for drink –"

"You'll have to show me when we go back inside, but unfortunately we have something else to deal with first," Crouch interrupted apologetically. "Something of vital importance."

Cassane popped the cork from the wine bottle and poured himself a glass. Then, with surprising deftness, he Vanished the bottle, cork, and empty glasses with another flick of his wand. "Well, spit it out."

"I've been promoted."

Cassane's face blossomed into a grin, and he raised his glass in salute to Crouch. "Guess all that hard work paid off, didn't it?"

Scrimgeour snorted with disgust, but Harry caught the subtle mocking note in Cassane's voice. Crouch didn't appear to catch it, and returned Cassane's smile.

"Although," Cassane added, after taking a swig of the red wine, "I can't help but be a bit surprised. I thought Charon or Bones were next in line for Department Head."

Scrimgeour visibly stiffened at the implied insult, and even Moody let out a low breath of incredulous disbelief at the comment, but Crouch dismissively waved his hand. "Ah, Charon's too valuable right now. The way he kills Death Eaters – he's a machine, Nathan, and it would just be silly to put him behind a desk."

"Yeah, just took his entire family being murdered to make him that way," Moody growled, his hands clenched tightly into fists.

"And considering the spat Edgar Bones got into with the Minister –"

"I was talking about Amelia, not Edgar," Cassane replied evenly.

Crouch gave a sniff of disdain. "Please. She might be a talented witch, but running the Department of Magical Law Enforcement requires a certain... stentorian presence the woman simply lacks."

Moody looked murderous, and Harry gave Tonks an uneasy glance. But even she looked angry at Crouch's remarks.

"So you're the new Department Head, then," Cassane said lightly, toasting Crouch again and taking another sip of wine. "Congratulations – so why did you want me here again?"

"Right to the chase, I like that," Crouch said approvingly. "I like that sort of commanding presence, that strength of will you only find in men like you, 're exactly the sort of man I need by my side."

Cassane kept his smile, but it looked a bit forced. "I'm flattered, once again, Barty, but I'm not a Ministry employee."

Scrimgeour rolled his eyes at that remark, and Crouch chuckled, putting his hand on Cassane's shoulder. "Oh, come now, Nathan, let's not clutter the truth of this. We're both intelligent men, and we both have a vested interest in defeating the Lord Voldemort. And considering... considering the current course the war is taking, we need a new strategy."

Cassane's eyes brightened with interest as he took another sip of wine. "What do you have in mind?"

"Lord Voldemort is not going to roll over and die just because we ask politely," Crouch said, his eyes gleaming with righteous passion. "We cannot afford to simply be defensive and reactive in this matter – we need to take back our power, fight fire with fire. And you, Nathan... well, the results your team has produced... quite extraordinary, as a matter of fact."

"Where, exactly are you going with this, Barty?" Cassane asked slowly, cautiously weighing every word as he eased out from under the man's hand.

"Simple," Crouch replied. "I would like to deputize you and your entire squad. Pull the entire group under the Hit Wizard banner, incorporate your skills and contacts into our organization."

Moody swore aloud.

Tonks turned to Moody with astonishment. "Mad-Eye –"

"I can believe he tried this," Moody snarled, looking as though he wanted to strangle Crouch with his bare hands. "That he dared –"

But Scrimgeour seemed to agree with Moody's point of view – the Auror looked livid, and was barely holding onto his temper. He looked as though Crouch had just personally stabbed him, and was twisting the knife with every pleasant word.

Cassane however, did not appear all that disturbed. Instead, he cocked an eyebrow.

"And what makes you think that my team has skills or contacts that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement doesn't have?"

"Well, you have managed to recruit Antonin Dolohov, for one," Crouch said with a huff. "Given his reputation as a duellist, I've been trying to recruit him for years, and yet you somehow snagged him in an afternoon. Not to mention his wife – now there's a foxy lady if I've ever seen one! And you have some fresh talent as well – Potter, Black, Lupin, Evans..."

"So I have talented people," Cassane replied with a shrug. "That's nothing special –"

"And to say nothing of your friendship with Judge Kemester –"

Harry went stock-still. What?

Cassane's smile was definitely a mask now. "I don't know what you're implying, Barty. Claudius and I are old friends, but nothing more –"

"And yet all of those warrant that conveniently fall into your hands – warrants that my Hit Wizards could never get even if they saved Claudius' little boys –"

"Barty, if you're implying that I have some sort of illegitimate relationship with the good Wizengamot Judge, you've been badly mislead," Cassane replied. He wasn't smiling now.

"All the same, Nathan, we're both on the same side here," Crouch said earnestly. "Your methods have proven most effective, don't you agree, Rufus?"

"No."

Everyone – including Harry, Tonks, and Moody, turned to look at Scrimgeour. Crouch looked as if he hadn't heard the Auror correctly.

"Pardon?"

"Oh, his methods might be effective," Scrimgeour began through gritted teeth, "but there's no damn way I want his team in my Department."

Crouch was taken aback, but Cassane just sighed and downed the rest of his wine. "This again, Rufus?"

"Your people are thieves and liars, Cassane, and don't even deny it! The fact that the Ministry is paying your people to stand above the law is downright fucking disgraceful! You play fast and loose with the law and Ministry policy, and to top it all off, you have the gall to demand the bounties for the capture of Death Eaters you find through intimidation and blackmail!"

"Well, I'm sorry if I'm depriving you of your skim, Rufus," Cassane replied bitingly, "but my people get the job done."

"So what about the little brothel you set up in Knockturn Alley, in total defiance of the law?" Scrimgeour snarled, his face going red.

"You mean the undercover operation concluding on Halloween that netted us three Death Eaters and three dozen recruits, not to mention the wealth of information we discovered on future operations?" Cassane replied evenly. "Yes, that was such a disaster."

"You had Evans, Meadowes, Mrs. Dolohov, and your own wife disguise themselves as harlots!" Scrimgeour shouted. "And Black as a violent and abusive pimp! Do you have any shame or respect for even your own people?"

"They all volunteered for the job, Rufus, you honestly think I would sink to Voldemort's level and abuse my own people?" Cassane replied, his voice icy and barely above a whisper. "Besides, Cassie was perfectly safe – I was there under Polyjuice as a dancer myself, and I would have had no compunction of disposing of anyone who put my wife or my team in danger! And like it or not, because of it, we saved lives, and put Death Eaters in Azkaban!"

"And that's my point," Crouch finished, raising a finger. "With the full backing of the law, your team will have the freedom to operate

however they wish, and this won't even be an issue! And, I might add, you'll have much better resources, Nathan – the full might of the Ministry –"

Scrimgeour looked ready to explode, but against all odds, when he spoke, his voice was flat and even. "Crouch, if you let him in, make him part of the Department... well, I don't think I could be part of a Department that endorses and funds that sort of behaviour."

"We already do pay them –"

"And believe me, if I had a way to cut that off, I would!" Scrimgeour snarled. "But there's a line between necessary evils held at a distance, and inviting them into the home." And before Crouch could protest, he spun on his heel and Disapparated with a crack.

Crouch huffed and turned to Cassane. "A shame, but –"

"He's got a point."

Crouch was nonplussed. "Pardon?"

"I mean it, Barty," Cassane said quietly. "I understand what you want to do – really, I do – but bringing us into the Ministry officially would cause hell to break loose and you know it. For once, Voldemort would have a point about the Ministry."

"Nathan, you know how bad the situation is, and your people are some of the best –"

"No, damn it!" Cassane snapped, stepping back and tossing his wine glass onto the marble balcony, where it smashed into a million pieces. "You can't legitimize what we do, it would make us what we're fighting against – particularly considering you wouldn't treat your people half as well, and you'd have psychological breakdowns on your hands! All my people know the ugly truth about our missions and get the help they need to cope! It's sure as hell not perfect, but we do it because it gets results!"

"And that's my point!" Crouch replied angrily. "It gets results – goddamn it, Nathan, we need that, and I'm willing to fight fire with fire –"

"And horrify the rest of the wizarding world when they see what your people would do, or what my people would do under the banner of the Ministry?" Cassane retorted. "There's a reason we're not a part of the Ministry, it's called plausible deniability, Barty!"

"So I take then, your answer is a 'no'?" Crouch asked, his voice abruptly frigid.

"Emphatically," Cassane snapped, turning away and storming towards the door.

"Your funding can just disappear, you know!"

Cassane openly laughed at this. "Try that threat again – both of us know you don't have the balls to cut off one of the only groups that are making a difference and not getting slaughtered for their trouble."

The bronze instruments whirled about the study, tracing silver lines as they sketched around him. His wand was outstretched, and with every sweep of it, the silver rippled like weeds parting in a pond.

The papers on his desk fluttered and shook as the air shuddered around him, nearly lifting free of their glass paperweights as the magic coalesced. The silver arcs around him began gleaming with the faintest traces of moonlight, creeping through the ivy-shrouded windows.

It was the final component of the magic.

He took a deep breath, and then exhaled. "Come."

Even with his knowledge of things of esoteric magic long-forgotten, he couldn't describe it. It was almost like being inside a silvery translucent bubble, with everything around him melting away to insubstantiality. It wasn't magic he was familiar with - in his years of travelling, he had never experienced something like this.

But he knew it worked.

He could see the figure, hazy and barely even there, approach the edge of the bubble, formed of silvery magic, bended space, and the slow time that one only finds in dreams... or reality so twisted it became a nightmare.

"You see me," he whispered.

The voice was tired and very old. "I see you."

He began breathing very fast. "Then you understand why I'm here?"

"Of course I do," the voice replied, every word carefully spoken, but filled with compassion. "I've longed for it as well. But you know they're already gone."

You know they're already gone...

Already gone...

Gone...

"NO!" he suddenly screamed, his voice raw and booming inside the bubble, the very sound contorting the magic. "I paid the damn price, bring them back!"

"You know I can't do that."

"Don't tell me they're not waiting, don't you dare tell me –"

"I'm sorry."

His reply was a wordless howl of pain, for he couldn't bring the words to mind. The anguish was far too fresh.

"There's nothing you can do," the voice replied quietly. "The two have gone on – and they do not need saving."

"Three," he breathed.

There was a long, echoing pause, and then –

"You seek another?"

"He's so close," he whispered, his eyes wet. "He's taking the same steps I did... and he deserves so much better than that..."

"I cannot control the flight of prophecy –"

"Prophecy be damned!" he shouted, red-hot sparks exploding from his wand. "I know you set him on this path! You stripped the barriers and paved the road with the best of intentions – and you knew exactly where it led." Each breath came heavily, and there was a stitch in his chest.

"I already know I will not earn forgiveness," the voice replied, suddenly very heavy and very sombre.

"Not from either of them you won't."

"So you seek only –"

"Fortunately for us," he whispered, "she can still save herself."

"As can you."

He sighed. "The pact can't be broken," he murmured. "The gears were set in motion...the gears I set in motion, in a moment of weakness when I thought there was a chance..."

"It wasn't weakness," the voice whispered. "It was hope."

"A fool's hope."

"That's all there ever is."

"And I still cling to it," he whispered, wiping a tear. "It's all I have... I can only hope..."

He took a shuddering breath. "You should be free now. If what I've read is true..."

"I was already free."

His eyes widened slightly with sudden astonishment. How... it was impossible... "Then where –"

"Setting the board," the voice replied as it faded with the figure. "Check."

And as soon as it began, the magic faded. The bubble did not burst, but dissolve into the air. Everything returned to focus.

He set his wand down on the desk and moved towards the panelled wall, where a single small photograph was framed. It was a picture of a family – husband, wife, and daughter. The husband and wife sat together on the sofa, quietly holding hands and watching the fire. The teenage daughter sat in a chair next to a lamp, reading with quiet contentment. Outside, snow brushed the windows, clean of ivy and stain.

If he had walked into the room now, the lamps would be dark, the fire guttering. The window would be shrouded in ivy and snow. The room would be dark, the flickering moonlight and embers illuminating a room filled with discarded books, eclectic devices, and memories.

And both chair and sofa would be empty of life.

"I'm coming, Cassie," he whispered, staring at the barely-moving photograph. "Just wait a little longer with Phoebe... I'm coming."

He turned back to his desk, to its single new addition in the past week.

A marble chess set.

The pieces were arranged midway in an elaborate and complex game, white versus black. So stark... if only it was that real...

He looked at the white pawn on the left edge of the board and moved it one square forward.

"Your move."

"I don't think," Harry said quietly, even as the ground began to slide away beneath his feet as the memory shifted, "that was what you were expecting."

Moody returned Harry's remark with a glare. "It doesn't make sense, that's what my problem is, and it's a piece that doesn't fit either. Cassane reportedly supported it when Crouch authorized Aurors and Hit Wizards to use the Unforgivables –"

"I thought that was in 1980, though," Tonks mused, running a hand through her now short, emerald-green hair. "There were probably a lot of –"

But Harry shushed her as the memory coalesced around them – into a very familiar location.

"This is Cassane Manor," Harry breathed, as he looked up to see the massive chandelier hanging in the foyer – a chandelier now covered in holly and ivy, draped with red velvet. The entire entrance hall, small as it was, had never felt warmer and more inviting.

"It looks like it's Christmas," Tonks said, looking around the foyer with curiosity. "But what year –"

The knock on the door made all three of them jump – Moody even pulled free his wand, but a second later, a woman in a sparkling, bright red gown and matching red boots moved to the door. She was a brunette in what Harry guessed her mid-thirties (although with magic, it was hard to tell), her hair cropped short and framing her face. But there was a mischievous glint in her brown eyes that almost made her seem a little younger. But who was she?

Harry nudged Tonks. "She's hot."

"I know."

"Just thought you should – wait, what?"

Tonks winked at him.

The knock was repeated, and the woman sidled up to the door. "Who is the best Hit Wizard alive?" she asked, her voice shockingly sultry, particularly for such a banal question.

There was a snort. "Nathaniel Charon, obviously," a very familiar voice replied on the other side of the door. "He's killed three Death Eaters, arrested five, and saved the French ambassador from kidnap and eventual mutilation. Cassie, it's cold, will you let me in?"

"That's not the security question, unconfirmed-Nathan," the woman named Cassie replied, a grin creeping across her face.

"Fine – what did your mother want to call our daughter?"

"Jacqueline," Cassie replied, rolling her eyes. "But we decided to call her Phoebe because you thought the name was cute and I knew that my daughter would eventually weaponize that cuteness."

The door creaked open, and a very weary-looking, snow-covered Nathan Cassane slid inside, pulling his wife into a tight embrace. "Much to the consternation of her parents, but it's a good thing she can take care of herself." He kissed Cassie lightly. "Is Phoebe home yet?"

"Yes, she's in the dining room," Cassie replied, taking her husband's coat and effortlessly banishing it with a wave of her wand onto a hanger waiting by the closet.

"You actually got her to help with dinner?" Cassane asked incredulously as he bent to unlace his shoes. "A Christmas miracle?"

But his wife pulled him back up. "Keep your shoes on, dear," Cassie replied with a smile, removing the snow from his shoes, cuffs, and hair with another wave of her wand. "Tonight's a special occasion."

"I thought this was just going to be a family affair," Cassane protested, but Harry could tell the protests were half-hearted. "You, me, my daughter that's growing up to be tougher than both of us –"

"Trust me," Cassie said with a wink, "you'll like this."

Cassane considered this for a few seconds before smiling. "Ah, what the hell – you are wearing those boots that I bought you for our anniversary last year."

"The same boots that kicked Chester Gibbon in the face when we arrested him and the rest of his Death Eaters in that brothel scheme, I might add," Cassie finished with a knowing smile. "You know, when you were under Polyjuice as my twin sister and we lured him into the backroom with the promise of –"

Cassane laughed, and Harry heard warmth and cheer in Cassane's laugh, something he had never heard before. "The best damn plan you ever dreamed up – but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Oh, I don't know," Cassie replied mysteriously, moving to a set of closed double doors. "Why don't I show you?"

She waved her wand, the doors flew open, and –

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

Harry could only watch in disbelief as Cassane gasped in awe as a group of people rose from their seat at the dining table to their feet in a cavalcade of laughter and smiles. He felt a warm sensation in his gut, for there was his father, holding hands and joking with an auburn-haired, green-eyed woman that had to be Lily – and there was Sirius, his hair only slightly groomed as he hoisted his bottle of Butterbeer. Lupin was sitting next to him, wearing and looking a little uncomfortable in what looked like newer robes, but there was still a smile on his face. And opposite him was Madam Pomfrey, sitting with a man who could only be her husband. And they all looked happy, and so relieved –

"Dad!"

"Phoebe!" Cassane said, his smile widening as his daughter – who had to be seventeen and with her short hair even shorter than her mother's, looked every bit as tough as described – ran into his open arms. "So good to see you – how's seventh year?"

"Let's... not talk about school," Phoebe replied with a bit of a forced smile, her embrace tightening. "It's Christmas, after all."

"And we figured," said a man rising to his feet at the opposite head of the table, "that we should focus on the better sides of our lives while we still have them!"

"By Merlin," Moody whispered to himself – a response Harry and Tonks nearly echoed. They both knew that face.

It was Antonin Dolohov.

But he looked far different. His hair was clean and short, his eyes gleamed with contentment rather than malice, and while his face was still slightly twisted, it didn't appear sinister. Rather, his expression was full of good-hearted mischief and confidence. He had broad shoulders, filling out the clean and almost dashing navy robes he was wearing.

Laughing, Cassane took his seat at the opposite end of the table, along with the rest of the people in the room, but Dolohov remained standing, grinning widely.

"Oh Merlin," a dark-haired, pale skinned witch groused. "Antonin, we want to eat, we don't want the speech –"

"Dorcas, please. As I am second-in-command of our fine unit –" Dolohov retorted.

"Third," Cassie interrupted, narrowing her eyebrows.

Dolohov raised his hands. "Honest mistake – thought you and Nathan split command, my mistake –"

"And that still makes you third, Tony," Sirius spoke up, drawing himself up into the snootiest demeanour possible. "After all, given you are an accredited professional Quidditch player, duellist, and accomplished novelist –"

"Oh sweet Morgana –"

"- you should obviously know that if two individuals or teams occupy the same position in the rankings, the person below them is unquestionably third," Sirius finished, the false nasal tone making the entire table break into chuckles.

"Sirius, why do we invite you, well, anywhere?" the woman named Dorcas – Dorcas Meadows, Harry suddenly realized, asked scathingly.

Sirius sighed. "Because I have personality, dear Dorcas, and I'm delightful to behold."

"If I might continue," Dolohov quickly interjected, before Dorcas could rise to her feet and throttle a snickering Sirius and James (while Lily rolled her eyes), "I'd like to say a few words."

He looked down the table at Cassane, sitting between his wife and his daughter. "Nathan, we've been through some tough times in the past few months, and as of now, we are the only unit affiliated with the Ministry that has experienced no casualties!"

A round of cheers broke out around the table, and Cassane smiled with pride – another expression had never truly seen.

"Yeah," Moody whispered grimly. "Shame that doesn't last."

"Now, as much as I'd love to take credit for all of it," Dolohov continued (drawing a few more chuckles and a glare from Dorcas and a fiery-haired, rather fierce looking woman sitting next to Dolohov that Harry thought was Dolohov's wife), "I've got to give some of the credit to Claudius Kemester here." He pointed down at a stern, craggy-faced man with bright orange hair sitting a few seats down, who was trying (and nobly failing) to keep a stern, emotionless expression and

not break into a smile. "He's gotten us over half our convictions, and for that, we owe him."

There was a smattering of applause at this, and Claudius did smile slightly then. But Harry noticed that not everyone at the table was applauding. Lupin, in particular, only clapped twice, and Dorcas Meadows didn't even raise her hands.

"But the majority of thanks go to you, Nathan," Dolohov continued, his voice suddenly becoming serious. "And although we have a messy and oft unpleasant job, the fact we're all alive today is... is, well, something for which we ought to be thankful. And a lot of that is thanks to you. You're a good man."

There were a lot of appreciative murmurs at this, and Harry saw a few of them wipe away hasty tears.

"So, here's to you, Nathan," Dolohov finished, hoisting his glass of what looked like scotch. "The man who is almost as gorgeous of a stripper as his wife."

Laughter broke out around the table, and Cassane went a little red as he returned the toast, along with the rest of the table.

"And now," Dolohov began, raising a finger, "I have composed a song for this occasion –"

"Okay, you can sit down now," the fiery-haired woman sitting next to Dolohov said with a huff, tugging her husband back into his chair.

"But Regina –"

"I'll make it up to you later, sweetheart," Regina Dolohov said with a surprisingly provocative wink, "but nobody needs to hear you sing. Let's eat."

And like at Hogwarts, the food magically appeared on the table – although Harry had the suspicion that Cassane didn't have a house elf, because none of the food was in matching dishes.

"Potluck?" he asked his wife as he spooned mashed potatoes onto his plate.

"It's an office party, Nathan," James called from halfway down the table.

"Damn good food, though," Phoebe added, piling roast beef and turkey onto her plate.

"No swearing at the table, dear."

"Guess you're shit out of luck, Dad," Phoebe returned, now adding salad to her plate.

Tonks chuckled. "I like her."

"I don't know why you keep bringing up the brothel scheme like it was so good," Dorcas Meadows suddenly said, taking a swig of her wine as she threw a glare down the table at Dolohov.

"Technically speaking, it was good, Dorcas," Lily spoke up, her voice slightly apologetic as she set down her water glass and began helping herself to a croissant. "Who brought the French food?"

"We did, dear," a silver-haired man that Harry didn't recognize, sitting with his wife and two grown sons. All of them wore extremely fine robes, and Harry frowned as he tried to remember who they were from the photograph –

"The Vunerens," Moody growled. "Malfoys only joined Voldemort after he killed every last one of them – they were old enemies. Shame too – Vunerens took a lot of powerful magic with them."

"I can't believe you, of all people, are saying that, Evans," Dorcas spat. "It was degrading, it was disgusting –"

"It was an act, Dorcas, you didn't have to volunteer," Lily replied tiredly, buttering her croissant. "Besides, even if it was uncomfortable, James was always close. If anyone tried anything that I thought I couldn't handle, he'd kick their ass."

"No swearing at the table," Sirius muttered distractedly, taking a swig and finishing his Butterbeer.

But Dorcas still simmered. "It was still wrong," she growled. "It was still gross."

"Dorcas, what's going on?" Cassane asked quietly, cutting into the argument.

The dark-haired woman scowled. "Well, it's kind of hard to consider this a happy Christmas when I know the Dark Lord is having a nice fun meeting in four days about the planned strike on New Years – and as the Order's special spy, I have to be there. Don't worry, I've already tipped off Dumbledore and the Ministry."

"Good," Cassane replied with a sigh. "Look, Dorcas, I know you're under a lot of pressure – we all are. Our job is hard and unpleasant – we need to keep our spirits up, though."

"And you have to admit, the fact that Nathan took Polyjuice was really funny," Dolohov interjected. "And watching him try to dance – ouch!"

"Sorry about my husband," Regina said primly. "The match against Portugal two nights ago was a victory, and that tends to put him in such a high mood he forgets to stop talking."

"I heard about that match!" James put in eagerly. "How on earth did you run an Earlman's Feint against that defence, with the Portuguese..."

From there, the conversation turned to Quidditch, as they talked and laughed and bickered. Harry, Tonks, and Moody could only watch in silence, wishing they could join in and experience some of that success, some of that happiness...

But the night ended far too quickly, and before Harry really knew it, everyone had moved into Cassane's living room for drinks and more talking. Harry tried to follow every conversation, but much to his surprise (and from the looks of his face, Moody's growing frustration),

none of them were talking about the war. They were talking about family, about Quidditch, about little problems in the Ministry and gossip.

Harry sidled next to Tonks and silently squeezed her hand.

"I wish we had this."

Tonks blinked twice. "It's like looking at a photograph, Harry," she whispered. "They were all happy, they didn't have to mourn... and even though they know they could all die tomorrow, they don't want to let go of that happiness. It's something to hold onto."

"I know," Harry replied, watching as his mother and father darted into a corner and began kissing passionately, to a few whistles from Sirius, Dolohov, and Phoebe (who had latched onto Sirius as almost a kindred spirit early in the evening and hadn't left his side). "I just wish... well, that we could have that."

Tonks turned to look at him, and for the first time Harry could remember, he saw a hint of a wet glimmer in her eyes.

"Who's to say we can't?" she whispered.

He pulled her into an embrace – an embrace that lasted a minute long. When they finally broke, they held hands as the night went on, until the last of the people – Dolohov and his wife – left through the Floo and the fire died down to embers.

Cassie and Nathan were alone in the sitting room now, standing by the fire. They looked into each other's eyes, and Nathan smiled.

"You know, I'll always remember this," he said, taking his wife in his arms. "Just because we're all happy together, and even though I know the odds, I can just think back to this..."

Cassie kissed him. "No matter what happens," she whispered, "you'll always have me. Merry Christmas, Nathan."

"Merry Christmas, Cassie."

And then they embraced as the fire sparked behind them, the snow drifting against the window – the last image Harry saw of the memory as it dissolved into darkness.

It had taken him hours and a fair amount of luck, but he had done it. Somehow, without tipping off Umbridge and her thugs, he had done it.

The entire case file, Kemester thought to himself, setting the folder down on his desk, and dimming his candles with a wave of his wand. As far as he was concerned, the less people who knew he was looking, the better.

Now to put together the pieces.

The first page was a report – his own report – of the night of August 2nd, 1995. The night an alarm that had sent four Hit Wizards to their deaths.

Including Bartholomew.

Kemester blinked twice and focused on the words that he had scrawled months before, the myriad ink splotches evident of the quills breaking in his hands because of sheer rage...

...Potter was taken in under Auror custody by one Kingsley Shacklebolt... series of explosions, considered accidental, gave Shacklebolt cover to remove Potter before he could be arrested by Hit Wizards...

He closed his eyes and clenched his fist. It all could have been so very different, if he had arrested Potter that night instead of Shacklebolt. So very different...

He turned the page and carefully studied the page. This one he hadn't wrote – it was a progress report by Shacklebolt himself, regarding the whereabouts of Sirius Black.

...all reports and sightings indicate that Black is hiding in the Tibetan mountains, likely searching for the quasi-mythical Shangri-La to utilize as a hiding place from Aurors...

"Yeah," Kemester muttered with a scowl, turning over the page almost violently, "and it's just such a damn shame that when I checked those 'reports', the Classification Charm prevented me from seeing any details... or who was sending those reports... or whether there was any text at all on those pages..."

He knew the investigation details regarding the hunt for Sirius Black were problematic – other wizarding nations wouldn't take kindly to foreign Aurors hunting criminals in their borders – but he also knew Shacklebolt's arrest of Potter was no coincidence.

The next page was very familiar – he had reread it countless times, cursing the disaster that had nearly cost him his career.

The Gringotts break-in.

He knew the explosions were a cover – simple fireworks, meant to distract and destroy evidence – but the tip from the accountant Welton had given him enough to question Shacklebolt. The finding of the paper fragment, restored with tricky Arithmancy magic, was a stroke of luck, and had nearly been enough to track Potter to the Grimmauld Place road – but it hadn't been enough to find anything of substance.

And using Veritaserum on a prominent and well-liked Auror hadn't helped either.

"What the hell was I thinking?" Kemester growled to himself, cursing his idiotic presumption. "Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

But even despite the inquiry and Potter going free, it hadn't been a total loss. He had enough suspected evidence to tie Potter to Black, and prove Shacklebolt's complicity. It wasn't as if anyone would believe him, but he knew he had something.

And turning over the page, he groaned. The Ollivanders' explosion. Bloody wonderful.

The investigation had been chaotic at best and poorly organized at worst. Having been reassigned to H.A.I.T., he hadn't been able to help Larshall pinpoint details – other than that Potter and an unidentified woman had been spotted mere feet from the explosion.

Could have been Tonks, Kemester thought, rubbing his temple as he scanned Larshall's scribbling. But if she's involved, why would they have been so close to the explosion... according to Larshall, they were almost inside the blast radius... and they only passed the shop after leaving the ice cream parlor... certainly not enough time to set up an explosion, and compared to the Gringotts break-in, this almost seems sloppy...but the debris suggests that the same potions used for the fireworks by Gringotts were used here... this isn't making any sense...

He turned the page, and groaned again. The second, damning strike against his career – although this time, it wasn't as much of his fault.

The Hogwarts Express confrontation.

He had outlined it, Larshall had executed it – and in an accident, another Hit Wizard had died. And somehow, Potter had escaped again.

No, Kemester suddenly thought, narrowing his eyes, not 'somehow.' I know exactly what happened – Sirius Black swooped down on his goddamned motorbike and Potter got on. And somehow, the two of them got past our security and into the school... and Shackbolt was on duty with H.A.I.T., so he couldn't have helped...

He paused, and turned towards his filing cabinet. Standing, he pried open the case and began rifling through the files, searching for the banal reports he had requisitioned, monitoring H.A.I.T.'s short-lived period at Hogwarts...

And on the day when Potter had broken into Hogwarts, Nymphadora Tonks had taken a day off.

Bingo.

"Still doesn't explain Black's involvement," Kemester muttered, staring at the attendance record as he slipped it into the file folder on his desk. "Every bit of evidence suggested that Black wanted Potter dead." He turned the page to another report – this one his own, the day he had personally arrested Potter on the trip to Hogsmeade. "And this attack proves it... unless the little Metamorphmagus was masquerading as Black the whole time... but it still wouldn't explain where they got the motorbike, or why Potter was looking for information about Black or Rosier accounts at all in Gringotts..."

He rubbed his forehead as he tried to ward off the headache. There were too many pieces to this puzzle, and he suspected he didn't even have half of them. Most of the documents he had in front of him, he had written himself – those that hadn't been destroyed by the explosions in the Ministry weeks earlier. And the few scraps of information he had managed to put together still weren't enough. Even the source who had leaked information to him about Potter's whereabouts outside of Hogwarts the night before he arrested Potter was shady. He had the strangest suspicion it might have even been Tonks, but if she was collaborating with Potter, why would she turn against him...

"Of course," Kemester murmured distastefully, turning the page with a scowl, "there's always manipulators."

The next report had been written by Dawlish, a high-ranking Auror that had brown-nosed his way to the top of his force, and who was often assigned as Fudge's personal bodyguard. And representing Fudge's interests, he was also the author of the next report: the murder of Laertes Rawling, by Sturgis Podmore, on the 'orders' of Albus Dumbledore. The evidence had been damning enough to send Podmore to Azkaban – where he was likely a cinder now – but Dawlish hadn't been able to tie anything to Dumbledore.

Kemester sat back in his chair and considered the unpleasant implications with a growing feeling of unease. Dumbledore hasn't been seen since before the Ministry attack, and even if he was the

backing force behind Potter, Tonks, and Shacklebolt, what's his angle? And why would he stand behind Black, he testified against him at his trial! And why on earth would he want Laertes Rawling dead?

And even accepting that Lord Voldemort has returned – even assuming Dumbledore's been right since the beginning – what's his angle? Other than Azkaban, there haven't been any obvious signs that the Death Eaters have been active at all. Even the attack on the Ministry – for which everyone's blamed Lucius Malfoy more than anyone, though I can't imagine why he'd try such an asinine tactic – doesn't seem like the Death Eaters' style; it was too uncontrolled and uncoordinated. And even if Voldemort was backing the new bank – another example of a good idea on my part ruined, this time by Malfoy's idiocy – why would he be so willing to allow the Malfoys to be slaughtered by the goblins?

Kemester frowned as he turned to the last page in the surprisingly small case file – a page Larshall had deemed his 'conspiracy paper'. Filled with random scrawls and arrows, it was nothing more than a tattered bit of parchment, crammed with theories and wild guesses regarding motivations, plans, and the entire convoluted nightmare that had been the new bank debacle – for some of which he had been responsible. And that's still going on, he thought wryly, as he remembered the articles in the Prophet furiously debating the reconstruction and legalization of the wizard-backed bank, which was currently still under repair...

He shook his head and, removing his conspiracy paper from the file, he closed the folder and pulled a new sheaf of parchment from his desk and began to write:

Fact: there is a leak within the Ministry of Magic, more specifically the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Information is being leaked to You-Know-Who, Dumbledore, or (likely) both.

Fact: the location of Dumbledore is currently unknown, and needs to become a priority if indeed You-Know-Who has returned.

Fact: the motivations of Sirius Black, Nymphadora Tonks, and Harry Potter are unclear, and a covert investigation must be mounted to ascertain the truth of their involvement.

Fact: something is happening at Hogwarts. More information is required.

Fact: Umbridge is a flabby, power-crazed and insufferable bitch –

He paused, and then inked the line out. Despite the truth in every word, it was a dangerous thing to write these days.

Fact: Umbridge's motives and goals, while aligned with the Ministry, remain unclear, as do those of Minister Fudge, Rufus Scrimgeour, and the bizarre involvement of Nathan Cassane (note – begin information gathering here – lack of information surrounding Cassane is disconcerting) –

Kemester paused again, this time setting down his quill. Rumour around the office had it that Cassane had just received executive clearance from Fudge himself to set up a laboratory down in the Department of Mysteries – the same Department where Laertes Rawling had been murdered.

And the same place from where Harry Potter somehow escaped after his interrogation, something Kester had only discovered in the confused brawl at Hogwarts that nearly killed him.

He frowned. "Too many coincidences, I think... and nobody's asked the question: why did Sturgis Podmore kill Laertes Rawling –"

"Kester!"

He started with shock, but he was still able to quickly shove his papers into his filing cabinet, rise to his feet, and scowl at Boyd Clyvis as he approached. It was rumoured that Clyvis would soon be replacing Larshall as his partner – something that he and Clyvis both passionately resented. Larshall was my partner – and even though he's gone, that's not changing right now.

"What do you want, Clyvis?"

"Just figured you should know that the first investigation team is back from Azkaban," Clyvis replied with a scowl, wrinkling his nose with disgust as his eyes raked Kemester's horribly scarred features.

Kemester sat back down and turned away from Clyvis with blatant disinterest. "And I should care because..."

"They found your partner."

Kemester paused for a few seconds against the sudden torrent of emotions, but forcing them back, he let out a strange noise, a cross between a huff and a snort.

"Fine, I'll see to it that his remains are given a proper burial –"

"You might want to rethink that plan," Clyvis interrupted curtly.

"Why?"

"Because Larshall doesn't need burying quite just yet," Clyvis replied, giving a toothy smile. "He's alive."

The memory coalesced again – this time to a location Harry recognized.

"Why do you think we're back here?" he asked aloud, looking around Cassane's Ministry office. This time, the windows were flecked with rain against a stormy night sky. Cassane was once again in his chair, but he didn't look nearly as content as before. In fact, he looked rather weary indeed as he scribbled as quickly as he could on the official-looking parchment.

"From the new Prophet on the desk, it looks like it's early April of 1979," Moody replied grimly, looking up from the newspaper folded neatly on the corner. "No wonder Cassane doesn't look good – his first two casualties were only a few weeks earlier."

Harry swallowed hard. "Who died?"

"Madam Pomfrey's husband and one of the younger Vuneren brothers," came the curt reply from the Auror. "Both were nasty – and public."

The knock on the door was quiet, but Cassane looked up the instant he heard it.

"Come in, Carson."

The dark-skinned man walking through the door at first reminded Harry of Shackbolt, but on second glance, this man was different. He wasn't as scarred or muscled, he had a smallish afro where Shackbolt was bald, and he didn't have the same proud bearing that the Auror did. But there was something about his eyes...

Harry knew those eyes. His son had the exact same eyes.

This is Dean's father.

"Glad you could find time to see me, Nathan," Carson Thomas said gruffly, settling himself in the chair opposite Cassane. "Especially considering... well, you know."

Cassane sighed and set aside his papers. "Yes, I do know. Is there something wrong, Carson?"

The black man shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well... I don't know how to say this properly, Nathan, without sounding like a fool or a coward, but..."

He looked up and met Cassane's eyes. "Nathan, my wife's pregnant."

Cassane's eyes lit up and his face broke into a wide smile. For the first time since the memory had begun, warmth appeared in Cassane's brown eyes. "That's fantastic! I'm so happy for you –"

"You really shouldn't be."

Cassane chuckled. "Carson, your wife is pregnant! Isn't that great –"

"It was an accident, Nathan," Carson interrupted, his voice still hard and very low. "I didn't want a child – not right now. Not with the war going on. Especially not with what we're doing. I'm not a bloody Weasley, for fuck's sake."

In an instant, Harry saw that Cassane understood completely. "So... what are your plans, then? Is your wife planning on –"

"She's not getting an abortion, if that's what you're asking," Carson retorted harshly.

"Wasn't even asking that," Cassane replied cautiously, "but there are magical contraceptive measures that if utilized at the right time –"

"I already asked her," Carson said curtly. "She doesn't want magic cast on her, or anywhere near here. We've already argued about it – it's not happening."

"Then I don't really know what you want me to do," Cassane replied, and Harry could tell the man was unsure where Carson was going.

Carson looked down at his big hands and shook his head. "Nathan... you and I both know it's getting worse out there. You've got James and Lily out every other night even though they're engaged, you've got Black running messages across the country on the damned bike of his, you're trying to juggle politics with Crouch and Dumbledore... and to top it off, Dolohov's out competing for England in professional Quidditch so they can make it to the damn World Cup." Carson shook his head. "And considering how Voldemort's starting to take notice of us..."

"Dolohov's cover is that of a professional Quidditch player, Carson, you know that."

"Yeah, and what's mine?" Carson retorted. "You're missing my point, Nathan, it's getting worse. And Voldemort's already shown he's willing to attack families. My wife's a Muggle, Nathan." He blinked twice as his voice caught in his throat. "She... she can't defend herself like I can."

Cassane nodded tiredly. "I see – you want a leave of absence?"

"Indefinite, if you can manage it," Carson replied with a nod. "I'm not sure how long it's going to last with her... but I want to be there while I still can. And if I can't, or if something happens to me... make sure somebody knows. Make sure that they're safe. You've got connections in the right places, you can make that happen."

"So what happened, then?" Harry asked quietly as the memory began to fade around them.

Tonks gave Moody a quick glance, and he replied in a harsh voice. "Carson Thomas stayed and protected his wife throughout the course of her pregnancy. Then, after Dean Thomas was born in early January, Carson had a fight with his wife and walked out."

"And?" Harry asked impatiently.

Moody closed his mismatched eyes. "They found him face-down in a ditch on the outskirts of Bristol. The Dark Mark was in the sky, his wand was snapped, and there was a hole the size of a Bludger in the center of his chest."

"We've received another message from the Italians, my Master," Bellatrix said quietly, sending the letter soaring into the unopened stack lying on a side table of the Dark Lord's laboratory. "It appears they are getting persistent."

"And until they have the boldness to come to England, their threats are meaningless," Voldemort replied smoothly, staring at the intricate magical diagram he had sketched within the air – and the hovering The Book of Inversion and Duplex behind it. "Completely irrelevant... unlike this."

He turned and fixed Bellatrix with a vivid red-eyed stare. "A lingering mystery, Bella, one I have overlooked, until just hours ago. You see, Potter screamed when I touched him in the graveyard... and while his blood was used to revitalize me, it should not have provoked that reaction."

Bellatrix breathed heavily as her hungry eyes followed Voldemort's every move as he turned back to the diagram. "So what do you think then, my Lord?"

"A deeper connection between he and I, beyond the fragile mental ties I believe have bound us since I tried to kill him," Voldemort replied, his voice barely above a whisper. "But how such a connection can exist, I cannot fathom... but that, at this moment, is not the question that we must consider. Instead, the question must be how we can... utilize it."

A small grin slid onto Bellatrix's face. "My Lord, you told me when you asked for my assistance, that you desired the destruction of Potter's mortal soul."

"I did," Voldemort replied calmly, turning to regard Bellatrix with interest – which only made the woman tremble with exultation.

"Then perhaps, my Lord, simple destruction of the soul may not be quite what we should seek," Bellatrix replied, her voice becoming sly. "After all, you've lured many to your cause with the right... levers."

"I do not suspect, Bella, that Potter would ever join me," Voldemort replied coolly, traces of amusement in his voice.

"We do not need him to join you, my Lord," Bellatrix replied, her smile growing wider as a mad glint appeared in her eyes, and she licked her lips eagerly. "All we need is to push him towards our end designs... and destroy whatever's left of him once his rage is smothered by despair."

Voldemort turned and regarded the magic diagram sketched in flame and red mist for a few seconds before turning back to Bellatrix. "You're suggesting a different sort of attack."

"In a matter of speaking."

"And the target, then?"

Bellatrix raised her finger to her lips and ran the edge of it along her smile. "Simple, my Lord. We destroy his ability to love – permanently."

"So let me get this straight," Harry said with a frown as the memory began to form around them. "Cassane ran some sort of group that was funded by the Ministry, but not officially a part of it? Like the Order was?"

Moody snorted. "If the Order ever received funding from the Ministry, it was from the salaries and bounties it paid the members that already worked for it, and whatever gold Dumbledore managed to raise. It's always been a problem – we just don't always have the capital to match that of, say, the Malfoys –"

"But Dumbledore always gave a lot," Tonks added, her own frown deepening as her hair went auburn. "I thought that was what you told me... and speaking of Dumbledore, where is he? I would have thought –"

"Looks like he's right... there," Harry murmured, his heart jumping slightly in his chest as the memory materialized, and surely enough, he could see the old headmaster walking down the hall, his expression concerned as his sky-blue robes fluttered around him. The corridor was relatively nondescript, lined with heavily locked and barred doors – but Dumbledore didn't pay any of the doors any attention. His eyes were only fixed on a man standing by an iron door at the very end of the hallway – a familiar man with greying hair and fiery brown eyes.

"About damn time you got here," Cassane snapped tersely, his voice like a striking whip as he stepped away from the door to peer behind the headmaster. "Where's Claudius?"

"Speaking to the crowd of reporters in the Atrium," Dumbledore replied, his voice very business-like as he stepped next to Cassane. "He'll buy you a little time – at least before Parkinson and his lawyers get here."

"And Scrimgeour?"

Harry was shocked – and a little scared. There wasn't just anger in Cassane's voice, but rage – sheer, undiluted fury that Harry had never heard before.

"He hasn't said anything –"

"Unsurprising," Cassane's voice was clipped as he turned towards the door. "I need your key – I heard Crouch's most recent regulation, that suspects are only allowed to speak with their people when the prosecution or a judge is present, and considering you're on the Wizengamot –"

Harry's eyes went wide. "What?"

"Yeah, Crouch did more than authorize the Unforgivables," Moody growled. "It's easy when people are scared – and dying."

Dumbledore raised his wand and with a simple wave, the locks evaporated into thin air. Shoving the door open and lighting his wand without a word, Cassane shoved himself inside the dank, dark cell –

"Nathan!"

Harry's mouth fell open in shock. "This is..."

"Surreal?" Moody finished Harry's sentence with a bitter laugh. "Yeah, imagine how it was when we actually arrested him."

Antonin Dolohov was the sole occupant of the cell – and he looked far worse than when Harry had seen him at the Christmas dinner. Bruises lined his face, and his lip was badly swollen from a punch to the face. He moved gingerly, but even then he couldn't move far – his legs had been chained to a wall. But the strangest thing about the picture was that Dolohov was still wearing what were unmistakably Quidditch robes in the colours of England. Did he get pulled straight off a pitch...

"And Dumbledore... Nathan, you're pulling out all the stops –"

"Enough with that, I've got Claudius on his way," Cassane interrupted, pulling Dolohov into a tight embrace with relief. "This is disgusting, how they're treating you – as soon as the paparazzi finds out they're keeping a national Quidditch player in these conditions –"

Dolohov snorted. "They won't care – the charges are Quidditch-related that landed me in here, or at least the ones they've deigned to release. Apparently, I was responsible for fixing the World Cup semi-final match."

"If I remember correctly," Dumbledore spoke up as his brow furrowed, "you were knocked out ten minutes in by a stray Bludger."

"But I was the captain, right, and the captain goes down with his ship," Dolohov replied, running a hand through his tangled hair. "Or his team, in this case. But we both know these are trumped up charges. Nathan, Scrimgeour's already been down here."

"Of course he has," Cassane hissed through gritted teeth. "And what did you tell him?"

"Nothing, obviously," Dolohov replied, his voice picking up as he looked surprisingly nervously around the room. "Nathan, people are going to start asking questions, why we've been so lucky... hell, there are suspicions we're spying for them, only picking up the people Voldemort's throwing away – Dumbledore, you've gotta help us –"

"Antonin, he'll do what he can within the rules," Cassane said warningly, "but that's not the point. What about that tip you got? What did you find out?"

Dolohov looked around, and lowered his voice, speaking faster than ever. "Nathan, Voldemort's moving. The attack we thwarted on Lily and James' wedding was just the beginning. He knows about us, Nathan, all of us. And he's coming for us – he's coming for you, Nathan, the only way he knows how –"

"Nathan," Dumbledore said warningly, "I can see them coming."

Harry darted around Dumbledore, and surely enough, he could see a crowd of people moving down the hall, all speaking very loudly and waving clipboards and papers –

"I'll get you out of here, Antonin, I promise," Cassane said fervently, pulling Antonin into another embrace before stepping away, moving out of the cell completely. "Just hold up a little longer."

"Tell Regina I'll be okay," Dolohov called out, his eyes filled with panicked desperation. "Tell her I love her, and I'll be out as soon as –"

BANG.

"He won't be going anywhere."

"Willard Parkinson," Cassane said, his eyes narrowing with hatred. "And to think the Ministry could sink no lower."

The man gave a short bow and a toothy smile, which only accentuated his extreme handsomeness. Perfectly coiffed brown hair, bright eyes, a muscular figure and a clever smile – the man was almost the image of wizarding perfection – but the second Harry moved to get a closer look, he recoiled. The man might be handsome, but there was something beneath the surface about the man that felt wrong. It didn't help that every one of his smartly dressed aides clustering around him all had expressions of mingled avarice and hunger. Neither expression graced Parkinson's perfect face – such emotions were beneath him.

"The Ministry," Parkinson began smoothly, "ah, chose only to hire the best in prosecuting this highly important case –"

"When there's another two Death Eaters that Charon personally brought in this week on multiple Muggle murder charges, you consider this one the important case," Cassane spat, his enmity for the lawyer evident in every syllable. "Clearly Voldemort's attorney has his priorities in line."

Parkinson stiffened. "I'm insulted."

"Good, then my work is done," Cassane replied curtly, pocketing his wand. "And good luck getting Dolohov to talk – he wasn't afraid of scum like you at Hogwarts, and while he's grown a set of balls, yours have only rescinded."

Parkinson's eyes hardened as Dumbledore coughed lightly at the crude words. "So you spoke to Mr. Dolohov?"

"We did," Dumbledore replied simply.

"Then I will require a full transcript of said conversation with complete documentation for the prosecution's case," Parkinson said primly, withdrawing a form from his cloak and passing it to Dumbledore – but before Dumbledore could even unfold it, it vanished in his hands.

"I don't think so," Cassane said quietly, this time keeping his wand free.

"Would you like a subpoena instead?"

Cassane's eyes flashed. "You know what?" he whispered, the barely-contained rage slipping into his voice and causing the lawyer and his aides to back up a half-step. "Go ahead – I dare you."

"You would stand against your own laws then, Cassane?" Parkinson asked, his eyes glinting with triumph.

"I stand where I always do," Cassane replied, and without another word, he shoved his way past the aides without a second glance back, Dumbledore only a few steps behind him.

Somehow, without quickening his pace, Dumbledore easily caught up to Cassane. "Nathan –"

"Is there anything you can do?" Cassane abruptly asked, looking at the old man, brown eyes meeting blue. "Anything, Albus?"

"I will do everything I can to protect him within the fullest extent of the law," Dumbledore said immediately, "and perhaps a little more."

"I'd appreciate it."

"We're on the same side, Nathan."

"So is the Ministry," Cassane retorted, throwing a contempt-filled glare behind him. "And we both know how that's going. Crouch wants my autonomy – and my people."

"They're good people."

"That they are," Cassane replied shortly, turning away to climb the nearby stairs.

"And on that, Nathan... my offer still stands."

"And the answer's still 'no', Albus," Cassane replied, turning around to meet Dumbledore's eyes again. "I know what you're doing with the Order is good, but... well, you and I know our differences in operations."

"Most of your team –"

"Already works for you part time," Cassane replied with a scowl, "and you managed to pull Remus out entirely."

"He chose to leave of his own free will."

"Yeah," Cassane replied, bitterness leaking into his voice. "Right."

And without warning, the memory dissolved around them, and Harry instinctively grabbed Tonks' hand as the colours bled together and swirled as the world around them warped, slowly reshaping...

"Where are we now?" Harry asked blankly, looking around the room. It was dark, lit only by strange small globes hanging on chains from the low ceiling that gave a pale white light. It strongly reminded him of Moody's office, covered in clippings and papers meticulously organized. And even like Moody's office, there were magical devices and objects lined up on counters around the room – although some of

the objects looked far more intimidating than anything Moody had ever brought into Hogwarts. The only wall without a counter or a shelf of books was dominated by a large window, and Harry couldn't see anything on the other side but sheer blackness.

"I know where we are," Tonks whispered suddenly, her eyes lightening up as she turned to Moody. "This is an organization room, for investigations!"

"Yeah," Moody replied curtly from where he was scanning a newspaper on top of a pile. "And if this is the most recent paper – and I think it is – this is early September of 1979. Dolohov was arrested at the end of August... not much time has passed..."

"But whose memory is this?" Harry asked with confusion. "I don't see Cassane..."

"I do," Tonks said quietly, extending a finger and pointing at the far corner of the room.

Sitting in an old, wooden chair, was Cassane – and he looked terrible. His robes were tatters hanging around his frame, and Harry guessed with a lurch in his stomach that the red stains around Cassane's sleeves and collar weren't ketchup or wine. His face almost looked as bad as Dolohov's, except where Dolohov was bruised, Cassane's face was littered with cuts, including a nasty one winding down from his temple that stilled leaked a trickle of blood.

But it wasn't just Cassane's face. No, there was something about the way he was sitting. There wasn't any confidence or pride or even sheer bravado in his expression. His eyes didn't glint with confidence... no, there was something else there... worry, and fear...

The door of the room cracked open, and Cassane was on his feet in a second as a hooded figure walked in.

"Well?" Cassane asked, his voice hoarse.

The figure pulled back his hood, and Harry's heart jolted as he saw his father's face again. "We got him, Nathan. He's being processed

right now, and then Sirius and Lily will have him down here for interrogation."

Cassane's face hardened. "And Claudius?"

"On his way with everything we need," James said wearily, hanging up his cloak. "The other Wizengamot members, Parkinson, Crouch, the press... none of them have a clue."

Cassane nodded curtly. "Good... this won't take long."

"Nathan, what are you –"

"My wife," Cassane interrupted, his voice hoarse again as he turned to face James, "and my daughter, James. They've been gone two days and... and there have been no reports. Cassie was following Mulciber, James, he's our lead."

"I know that," James replied cautiously, "and given usual timing on Death Eater attacks –"

"I'm not relying on that, Voldemort's looking to get to me personally."

"Which is why you really shouldn't be the one doing the interview," James said in a rush.

For the first time in Harry's life, he saw a look of shock pass Moody's face. Tonks whistled under her breath as Cassane turned to face James.

"Did you miss the part of the conversation, Mr. Potter," Cassane began quietly, "where I said my wife and daughter were missing?"

"No, but –"

"And you think for one nanosecond that I'm not going to go in there myself and find out who took them so I can get them back?" Cassane growled, his voice growing louder and louder. "Do you honestly think that?"

"Nathan, you're too close to this!" James pleaded. "Look, I care about Cassie and Phoebe just as much as you do, but you know as well as I do we'll be lucky if we only get one shot at this before everyone else knows we've got him! Mulciber's a Death Eater, one that specializes in the Imperius Curse! He's a manipulator, and he's going to try and mess with our heads!"

"You think I can't handle –"

"All I know is that you wouldn't want yourself to make a mistake because it's someone you care about," James replied, swallowing hard and casting a quick glance towards the door. "And I'm not going to lie and say that this'll be easy, but if we want answers fast, we need to be analytical. Look, let Lily take the interrogation. She's really good, she'll get something out of the bastard, and with Liar's Heartstone all over the damn market, she's probably got the best chance we've got at getting answers without Veritaserum."

There was a long pause as Cassane seemed to consider this.

"And you're... you're comfortable with your wife in that room with Mulciber?"

"We'll be watching from the window," James said with a nod, "and I know Lily can take care of herself. Hell, the three of us helped get the bastard in the first place."

Cassane looked as if he was going to say something, but the words caught in his throat, and he simply nodded as they turned towards the window.

Then the light clicked on the room beyond the window, and Harry couldn't help but gasp.

The room was familiar – starkly familiar. Kemester had beaten him bloody in a room just like it. The same dark and close walls, the same metal table bolted to the floor, the same low-hanging light that sputtered every few seconds.

James took a deep breath and quickly glanced at Cassane. "Are you ready for this?"

Not really, Harry thought, a strange feeling of dread creeping up into his stomach. He had the feeling he really didn't want to see this interrogation, not one bit.

Cassane swallowed and he nodded once. James drew his wand and tapped the glass.

"Bring him in."

The concealed door of the interrogation room broke open with a shuddering bang – courtesy of being kicked open – as a young Sirius shoved his way into the room, dragging a snarling, spitting, violently cursing man wearing rich dark robes. Sirius' own garb was just as dark, but much cheaper – and more martial. His leather jacket almost looked military (and more than a little strange thrown over his robes), and he was wearing what looked like combat boots made of black dragonhide.

Moody snorted. "Trust Sirius to augment his uniform."

The prisoner spat and tried to take a swing at Sirius, but Sirius easily sidestepped the wild punch – and then slugged the man twice in the face in one easy motion. The prisoner reeled, but Sirius wasn't done. Manhandling the prisoner with surprising dexterity, he slammed him headfirst into the table.

Harry couldn't help but wince – he remembered being in nearly the same position.

James tapped the glass again. "Easy, Marauder, we need him conscious. Tell our mutual partner she's got the interrogation, and that she knows what to ask about."

Sirius looked up and glared at the window. "This fucker ripped my jacket!" He held up one of his arms to display a large tear in the leather, and a smear of blood leaking from behind the torn lining. "I just bought this thing!"

"Marauder –"

"He ripped my jacket, Prongs! You know how expensive –"

"We'll deal with it later, Padfoot," James said tersely. "Lock him in."

Sirius rolled his eyes, but without another word, he pulled the nearby lever next to the table, and the very familiar vambraces dropped down onto the Death Eater's forearms. The prisoner immediately began to struggle –

"You keep moving like that, you'll lose both your arms."

Harry's eyes widened, and his breath caught in his throat – Lily Potter had just entered the interrogation room.

She was wearing the same armour that Harry's simulacrum had worn at Azkaban, albeit a bit less scratched and worn. Her robes were tattered and singed, but they were still in far better shape than the robes that Cassane was wearing.

But it was her face that struck Harry's attention. He had seen her in the Mirror of Erised, and in the photo album that Hagrid had given him, but never like this. Her green eyes - so much like his own – were hard as steel, and her jaw was set with angry determination. Her auburn hair had been cut short – it must have been right after the wedding, she had long hair then, Harry thought – and it framed her pale face starkly.

And unlike Sirius, who nodded as he slipped out of the room and closed the door behind him, her wand was drawn.

The Death Eater froze in mid-struggle and glared up at her, before spitting once the table.

James winced, and Harry heard Moody mutter, "He really shouldn't have done that."

The backhanded slap came out of nowhere, and although Lily's motion was almost delicate, her hit sent the Death Eater reeling, his shoes slipping out from under him as he scrambled to find a crouching position – unlike Harry, he hadn't been given a chair.

"Her hit shouldn't have knocked him back that hard," Cassane murmured. "She barely moved."

"She charmed her gauntlet so when she backhands someone, she moves with no air resistance," James replied softly, a small grin creeping onto her face. "Got to love it."

"That's actually a good idea," Tonks muttered, her hair going aquamarine as she rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Wonder if we can try that..."

"So, as I was saying," Lily continued, her eyes glittering as she leaned against the wall parallel to the table, opposite the window and perpendicular to the door, "you struggle much more, you'll lose those arms. And I don't think Lord Voldemort will find much use for a maimed Death Eater besides cannon fodder."

"The Dark Lord," the Death Eater spat, still scrambling to find a good crouching position, "would not abandon me. He would give me new limbs –"

"I'm sorry," Lily interrupted, raising her wand and twirling it lightly around her finger, "were you under the impression that you'll ever see your precious 'Dark Lord' ever again? The Ministry's got a slew of Dementors that want your soul, Damien Mulciber – and it would be all too easy for us to give you them."

But Mulciber let out a harsh barking laugh at this, a noise Harry was a little surprised the man could make – he looked like a burly guy the same age as Lily, not a middle-aged grizzled veteran. "You think the Dementors are still –"

"Or I could just beat every scrap of information out of you," Lily continued idly, continuing to twirl her wand, "and since you've undoubtedly taken Liar's Heartsone –"

"That your old friend made –"

The next hit made even James wince, and Harry could only watch as Lily wiped the smear of blood of the back of her gauntlet, with almost disinterest.

"Anyone who collaborates with scum like you," she said in a low voice, "is not my friend, Mulciber. So let's cut out the garbage and let's see if we can get something worthwhile out of you."

"And you'll think I'll talk?" Mulciber retorted, wiping blood from his broken nose on the table as he stared up at Lily, a strangely defiant, fanatic look in his eye. "Talk to a Mudblood like you?"

But Lily, who finally met Mulciber's wild eyes, simply shrugged. "Well, there's a good thing about being someone who can charm anything," she said lightly, giving her wand one final twirl. "It makes a mind like yours so much more pliable."

"What are you –"

"Legilimens!"

The spell hit Mulciber like a bullet, and he thrashed wildly as Lily twisted her wand in concentration before –

"NO!"

Lily paused, and then lowered her wand in the sudden silence.

"An Occlumens... so Bellatrix has been training all of you –"

"We're wasting time," Cassane muttered, his hand moving towards his own wand, but James grabbed his shoulder.

"Nathan, give her some time, please."

"I don't have time to just waste –"

"Just hang on," James pleaded. "A few more minutes –"

"Well, without Legilimency," Mulciber hissed triumphantly, "you ain't getting into my head."

Lily pursed her lips and stepped a little closer, raising her wand. "Well, that's not exactly true, Mulciber. See, I've been working on this little charm, and it's keyed to my thoughts... and all I need to do is touch my wand to your temple and pull... and I should be able to get exactly what I need."

"What?" Moody exclaimed, both of his eyes going wide. "When did she – how did she – why didn't she tell us?"

"She might be bluffing," Tonks replied warily, a sentiment that Mulciber echoed an instant later.

"You're full of shit."

"That's your opinion."

"It's fact!" Mulciber shouted. "The spell doesn't exist, you stupid slut!"

The next insult didn't even come, because Lily had sighed and effortlessly flicked Mulciber in the mouth. There was a sickening crack, and bloody teeth flew from the reeling Death Eater's mouth.

"Mulciber, I create spells," Lily said, shaking her head with disdain, hardly even acknowledging the man bleeding copiously from nose and mouth onto the table. "And I'm good at what I do – unlike you. And I've just been looking for the right person to test this magic. You know, somebody expendable. And best of all, I can get all the memories you're trying to hide."

"He's not expendable, he has information!" Cassane snarled, jerking out of James' grip and drawing his wand. But Sirius, arriving in the

room in fresh robes, caught Cassane in midstep and slowly guided him back towards the window in a surprisingly gentle manner.

"And as for you... well, I do suspect the charm has adverse effects on the brains of those it is cast upon," Lily replied softly as her eyes narrowed. "So do you really want to take that risk, Mulciber? Do you really want to risk it all? Do you want to risk becoming even more useless to Voldemort than you already are?"

Mulciber's jaw quivered, and Lily's wand moved closer and closer, her stare never wavering.

"We can't let him destroy his mind!" Cassane shouted, his eyes going wild as he shoved Sirius backwards. "I'm not losing Cassie and Phoebe on a bluff, I'm not –"

"She knows what she's doing, Nathan –"

The wand tip moved closer and closer to Mulciber's temple –

"Mens –"

"Wait."

Lily stopped the spell mid-incantation, and looked with amusement at Mulciber. "You're going to talk?"

Mulciber swallowed hard. "What do you want to know?"

"Pensieve, now," Cassane ordered, and James, who let out a relieved sigh, pulled a dented shallow bowl from a nearby cabinet.

"Whatever you might know regarding Cassandra and Phoebe Cassane," Lily replied evenly, crossing her arms over her chest. "The memories, of course, so we're not missing anything."

"Nathan, you need a warrant for that," Sirius warned.

"I'll get one from Claudius when he gets here," Cassane replied quickly, his eyes fixed on Mulciber as he slowly pressed the Pensieve

against the glass. And to Harry's shock, the glass shimmered like liquid, and the Pensieve passed right through, to be caught a second later by Lily's deft Summoning Charm. And in one fluid motion, she slammed it on the table with a loud bang.

But a strange expression was creeping onto Mulciber's face. "Cassane... you said Cassane."

"Good to know I didn't damage your hearing," Lily replied coolly.

A grin crept onto Mulciber's thin face. "He's here, isn't he?"

"Apparently, I did damage your cognitive functions, though," Lily replied humourless, raising her wand. "The memories, Mulciber –"

"Cassane, you want to know what your wife tasted like? You want to know what she said when I was inside –"

But he didn't get anymore words off, as Lily slapped her wand to the Death Eater's temple and pulled. The memory strand came fast, and fell into the waiting Pensieve, which she hurriedly Banished with a wave of her wand through the shimmering glass and into Cassane's waiting hands.

And then gravity seemed to shift again. Harry felt his perspective warp, and suddenly he was falling and falling and falling –

The room was dark and made of stone, only lit by a few torches along the walls. The room was very small, but it was filled with tables and couches and strange instruments mounted on the walls –

"This is a memory within a memory," Moody said, his eyes widening as he saw Cassane land in the room and look around wildly, looking for someone, anything –

And there she was, stripped and shoved into a barren corner like a piece of discarded garbage, surrounded by broken shards of metal, covered in blood from horrific lacerations across her fair skin, her brown hair thrown back to show her neck at an unnatural angle...

"CASSIE!"

The breath caught in Harry's throat as Cassane – a man who Harry had never seen snap or seriously lose control of his emotions, streak across the room and try to hold his wife in his arms – only for his hands to pass right through her –

And then the door opened.

They all looked up to see two masked men drag someone inside the room – it was dark, it was hard to tell who it was –

"Mummy! No, Mum, no –"

Her voice was cut off by a brutal crunch, as one of the masked figures punched the woman in the jaw, silencing her just long enough to slam her against the wall opposite.

Harry recognized her in a second – it was Phoebe, Cassane's daughter.

She had been stripped naked as well, and her eyes were wide with utter terror. Harry could hear Cassane's breath catch in his throat –

"We don't get to take this one?" the first Death Eater asked with disappointment.

"We don't need to," the second Death Eater – Mulciber, Harry realized with horror – replied, turning towards the smouldering fireplace. He picked up a thin flaming log from the fire in his gloved hand. "We just need to make sure he sees it."

"Daddy?" Phoebe whimpered, her eyes fixed on the flaming log. "Daddy... daddy, where are you?"

"Oh, he's coming, sweetie," Mulciber whispered, turning the log over in his hands as his partner picked up a small bucket of a brackish liquid, a short stubby knife, and what looked like a paintbrush. "We're just going to make sure... you're nice and ready for him."

Cassane let out a choked sound, and Tonks grabbed Harry's hand.

Moody only closed his eyes.

"Dad... oh god, it hurts! DADDY! HELP ME!"

Harry jammed his eyes shut – he didn't want to see this, he didn't want to see anymore, he pulled Tonks into her arms as he felt tears fill his eyes even as his feet left the ground...

They came out of the Pensieve, and James and Sirius immediately steadied Cassane on his feet, but Cassane didn't need to be steadied. Instead, he drew his wand.

"REDUCTO!"

The glass exploded, and Cassane went right through the window, seizing Mulciber by the throat, his eyes red with tears and wild with fury.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

"I don't –"

"Lily, break his legs."

"Locomotor mortis. Reducto."

CRACK

"AAAAHHH! Th-the old Black safehouse that Cygnus and Druella used during Grindelwald's –"

It was enough for Cassane, who let go of Mulciber's throat and vaulted back through the window, Summoning his cloak and hat without even a wave of his wand.

"Nathan –"

"Lily, kill Mulciber."

Lily's iron-hard demeanour finally broke, and she threw a shocked glance at James and Sirius. "I... I don't think – Nathan, we can't just –"

"Fine," Cassane snapped, pulling black dragonhide gloves over his hands. "Then make him wish for it."

He spun on his heel, and Harry felt the sudden squeeze of space crushing around him...

They reappeared - in front of a building that had been consumed.

The roof was gone entirely, torn apart by flames. The stone walls were even partially melted, evidence that the fire that had consumed this building was far from natural. But even despite the danger, Cassane didn't care. He ran into the building, his clothes soon covered with soot as he ran from ruined room to room, the flames guttering around him as he screamed his daughter's name.

"Phoebe? PHOEBE! WHERE ARE YOU? PHOEBE –"

He felt Tonks' hands around him and he pulled her into an embrace. He could feel the wetness of her tears on his face...

"PHOEBE, I'M HERE... oh no, oh god..."

Harry looked at that moment, but he wished he hadn't – Cassane had found the room – and his daughter.

"Phoebe, I'm here – Daddy's here... oh god, no... no please..."

Tonks was sobbing opening now, her hair jet black as she watched Cassane sink to his knees, his tears tracing lines in the dirt on his face...

"I'm sorry, Nathan."

Harry looked up at this – and he couldn't believe his eyes.

Antonin Dolohov was standing barely feet away from Cassane, his robes covered in ash, his eyes red. His arms were bare.

And on one of his arms was the livid red tattoo of the Dark Mark.

Cassane looked up, his hand going to his wand. "Antonin... you... you..."

"It was quick," Dolohov replied quietly. "She asked for it... in the end."

"Why didn't you try and save her?" Cassane screamed, his entire body shaking with emotion as he tore his gloves off and pulled his wand free. "Why did you let this happen? Why –"

"REGINA'S DEAD!"

The words stopped Cassane in a second, and his mouth fell open. "But..."

"What happened to protecting her, Nathan?" Dolohov roared, his own eyes wild with sorrow and fury, mirroring Cassane's. "What happened? Instead, she's fucking dead! The Ministry came for her just like they came for me, and she fought and... and –"

"Antonin, I didn't know – it doesn't mean y-you should –"

"WHY NOT?" Dolohov yelled, yanking his hood back. "It's always been them! It's always been the rest of the world that ruins people like us! And no matter how fucking hard we try and save them, they piss all over it and ruin our lives! EVERY-FUCKING-TIME! SO FUCK IT! I'M DONE!"

Dolohov's words were ragged, as if they were ripped straight from his throat, but he didn't say a word until Cassane stood.

"I'm not gonna kill you, Nathan – not today. He wants you to live, you know." Dolohov blinked twice and ran a hand across his eyes. "He wants you to become like me."

"I'll never join him," Cassane whispered hoarsely.

Dolohov shook his head sadly as he picked up a battered broom leaning against the ruined wall. "Nathan... in his books, you already have. It's all part of the plan... he said one dead wife deserves another... but he's already won. I'm just there because there are people that need to die and meet their justly deserved hell – you know, the one we were already going to."

"You could have saved her," Cassane whispered.

"I did," Dolohov replied quietly as he mounted the broom, "and I only wish I could save you too. Save yourself, Nathan – please."

The wand dropped from Cassane's nerveless fingers, and he fell to his knees in the ash where his daughter had died as Dolohov slowly rose into the sky. Without warning, Harry felt himself and Tonks rise into the sky as well, but he somehow managed to catch the last of Cassane's words.

"They're dead... they're dead... and so am I."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Did you get an answer out of him?" Malfoy demanded, his nose flaring as glared at Zabini.

"He sent the message, if that's what you're asking," Zabini replied coolly. "I'm not sure what else you wanted from him."

Malfoy let out a hiss and continued pacing. It was the weekend – which was fortunate, considering Nott's worsening condition, and that if he attended a class, it was only a matter of time before somebody found him out. And then Moody would come and who knows what...

"Stop pacing," Zabini finally snapped, matching Malfoy's glare.

"Well, forgive me if I'm a little concerned!" Malfoy retorted, moving to the plush armchair opposite Zabini and dropping into it. "The fortunes of my family, the hunt for Nott, the undeniable fact that Potter remains on the loose – and I thought at least you would care about that last bit –"

"I have had the opportunity to grieve for my mother," Zabini said curtly, turning back to his book. "After all, upon reflection, considering... elements of her lifestyle, it was only a matter of time."

"That's callous –"

"It's as if you don't know me at all, Draco." Zabini flipped a page in his book. "Potter's fate is up to the Dark Lord, as it has always been – why should I waste my valuable time concerned with it?"

"Namely because you're a target –"

"And unlike you, I'm inconspicuous," Zabini returned crisply. "Potter won't even look at me."

"And what about Weasley, or Granger?" Malfoy pursued, his eyes narrowing. "They know you're involved."

The dark-skinned young man considered this, and closed his book slowly. "Weasley... Ronald Weasley is reckless, but considering his brother's death, he'll either seek revenge – which we have not seen – or he'll be cautious."

"And Granger?" Malfoy wrinkled his nose with disgust. "The Mudblood is at least moderately intelligent – she might figure something out, and if Weasley eggs her on, she might find something to pass along to Potter. She –"

"I haven't seen anything from Granger to indicate that there is any close connection to Potter –"

Malfoy snorted. "Yeah, but you haven't had to deal with them regularly for the past few years. If Granger isn't whispering something in Potter's ears, I'll eat my shoes –"

"A meal, given the state of your estate, you probably couldn't afford," Zabini remarked wryly.

"Shut up. My point is that if we need another target – particularly if we want to neutralize Potter – she should be on the list." Malfoy lowered his voice. "We targeted Loony Lovegood for less."

Zabini paused before speaking, his eyes narrowing. "That also brings us back to dealing with our mutual friend Theodore, and considering his degeneration –"

"Wh-Whose degeneration?"

Malfoy hastily looked away as Zabini stopped in mid-sentence and looked at Nott. Somehow, the young man had added bleak circles under his eyes to his already horribly dishevelled appearance. But despite a strange listlessness in his expression, his gaze looked surprisingly sharp.

"Sounds like... sounds like you're talking 'bout me," Nott said, his hands clenching into fists. "That's cruel, Blaise – I'm helping you, both

of you, and I don't like insubordination from the people under my command."

Malfoy opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it immediately. It wasn't worth contradicting Nott right now. Not when he was as unstable as he was.

"In any case, the Dark Lord will probably be replying soon," Nott continued, his eyes glinting dangerously, even as his voice didn't change from its half-slurring monotone. "The circle... it's almost linked, Draco, it's almost all the way 'round. We served the Dark Lord well...well, for the most part." His eyes rested on Malfoy. "There are still weak links in the chain... pieces that need a little refinement."

"What does that mean, Nott?" Zabini asked cautiously.

"It means that to complete the circle, we need to take from all four houses – and we've been neglecting one in particular," Nott replied, his unblinking stare fixed on Malfoy. "First was Ravenclaw, then Gryffindor, then Slytherin blended with Ravenclaw – with a jump-start to Hufflepuff – and now we've got four left to complete the circle. The Hufflepuff is already prepared... but that still means we need a Gryffindor... and a Slytherin."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "And you can't just do what we did with Lovegood –"

Nott's eyes flashed dangerously. "Bending rules only works once – and trust me when I say we shouldn't snap them completely."

"Okay, then what about –"

"No – it needs to be a Slytherin, Draco." Nott's gaze drifted as if to scrutinize Malfoy from every angle. "Are you... volunteering?"

"He's not," Zabini quickly interjected, motioning for Malfoy to leave the room, "but let's talk about something – you said four, not three. Why?"

Nott immediately launched into an animated discussion – or at least his body language was animated, his voice was still completely monotonic, but Malfoy had long stopped caring. Shoving his books into his bag as he walked, he ducked into the dormitory bathroom and shut the door, breathing hard as he leaned against the dark, cold wood.

He couldn't quite believe it – Zabini had been right all along. Nott was insane – and it could have easily been Malfoy in that position should the Dark Lord had chosen him. It could have been me, he thought with a shudder, casting a quick glance at the mirror before turning away. I'll take the scars over insanity, thank you very much...

Malfoy took a heavy breath as he set his bag down next to the sink as his thoughts drifted. What would have the year been like if the Dark Lord hadn't come back? He would have had his O.W.L.s, his homework, his family, girls... now all lost in the mission.

A necessary loss... doesn't change the fact that it complicates things...

Tap-tap

He looked up, and turned to the tiny window set high on the bathroom wall. Next to it was a small, rather scrubby-looking owl with ruffled feathers and a surprisingly sour expression – and a letter tied to its foot.

Malfoy quickly opened the stiff latch to the window and deftly pulled the letter free. It had to be for him, but from who?

The answer became apparent the second he unrolled the note.

To my son,

As I'm quite sure you are aware, our family has fallen upon hard times in the past few months. It has led your mother and me to reconsider our options for the future and the long-term prosperity of our line, and of your education.

As I know you are quite aware, Hogwarts is no longer safe – but what you may not know is that whatever meagre safety you might have will slip away as your mission continues, particularly given certain factors involving its instigation.

On a similar note, our family has suffered grievously through a combination of mishandled opportunities, failures, and accidents that have rendered us pariahs. Such a status is not befitting to this family and our station, and thus, after much discussion, we have a new plan.

Given the damage to the family holdings here in England, we will be withdrawing to one of our many summer properties on the mainland until we can find a more permanent locale. You will be transferred to Beauxbatons (Durmstrang will be far too easy of a target by those seeking you) under an assumed name, and thus attain anonymity, given that you remain unmarked. My flight will prove slightly more complex, but I can assure you that the pieces are already moving.

I know this is not ideal for you, my son, but we have no other choice. It is clear that certain elements view this family as nothing more than pawns on this chessboard, and I refuse to remain a pawn any longer.

Please reply with your confirmation of this message, along with a date on which you will be available to leave Hogwarts inconspicuously.

Sincerely,

Your father

He could hardly believe the message, and he read it again. And then again.

By the fourth time he had reread the letter, some of the fear had vanished – but only some. It would be tricky, very tricky to pull off.

But there was a way out – he had a way out – and a chance to start over.

He had never been so happy to leave Hogwarts before in his life.

Kemester wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead as he looked into the tiny room where Larshall – his partner – was lying. He had run up the narrow rickety stairs to get to the rooms, and the very fact that he was breathing hard showed his loss of fitness from Azkaban, but he didn't care – not this time.

He strained to get a better look, but he couldn't see much of him, and he didn't dare open the door and compromise any healing magic that was placed on the room itself.

"Where's the bloody Healer, they told me he'd – ah, perfect!" He gestured towards the man in bright green robes approaching, scanning a clipboard through narrow-rimmed spectacles. "You told me I could –"

"He is awake, yes," the Healer replied irritably, looking up from his clipboard.

"Then I can see him?" Kemester pursued, raising his eyebrows with impatience.

"As soon as I unlock the doors, yes, but before we do so, I'd like to discuss your partner's condition," the Healer replied, peering down at the clipboard again. "And, once again, you won't have much time, your Department requires that he undergo a full debriefing –"

"And when they get here, they can have it," Kemester said, trying to rein in his impatience. This time, I'm not going to treat him like garbage – this time the partnership will mean something... "So what did you want to discuss with me, then?"

The Healer looked down the hall carefully before stepping closer and lowering his voice. "You do know the reports that have come back from Azkaban –"

"I was there, on the last Portkey out before the island exploded," Kemester replied with a grimace. "I thought Larshall was dead – nobody could have survived that explosion. At least that's what I heard – the Spire was apparently levelled –"

"I wouldn't know about that," the Healer interrupted quickly, "but what I do know is this: from what few fragments of his clothes we found embedded in his skin, we magically tested and analyzed – and we discovered that from the scale of the burning, if Mr. Larshall was indeed wearing these clothes, he should be less than a cinder, rather than sprawled half-drowned on the edge of what's left of the island."

Kemester ran his hand along his chin. Perfect, just another question for which I don't have an answer. "You're saying he shouldn't have survived."

"I'm saying that it is physically impossible he survived," the Healer replied in a low voice. He looked inside and shook his head with disbelief. "He shouldn't have lived, Mr. Kester, much less in as good of a condition as he is, with limbs and organs intact and functioning!"

"So you're telling me that –"

"It's a miracle he's alive, if we would believe in such things," the Healer replied, looking back to his clipboard with a huff. "Those of us who believe in the law of large numbers just call it a statistical anomaly."

"Excuse me, what?"

"It's a Muggle thing," the Healer replied with irritation, drawing his wand and muttering a few words as he tapped the door. The door glowed slightly, and then dimmed. "Alohomora. There, you should be fine to go inside."

"Thank you," Kester replied, wrenching the door open and heading straight into the room, completely ignoring the Healer's scoff as he continued down the hall.

"Well?"

"I told him everything you instructed me," the Healer replied in a low voice, not looking up from his clipboard. "And the gold best be in my vault at Gringotts by tomorrow morning or there'll be hell to pay."

The Healer could see the cloaked, blond man's lip curl. "Not yet ready to transfer to a wizard bank?"

"When a bank gets shelled by goblin artillery, it's hard to trust the financial security of such an institution," the Healer replied briskly. "Now either proceed to your appointment or get out of my way, I have patients."

Lucius Malfoy nodded sharply, pulling his hood tight around his face as the Healer left. He had been fortunate to discover the man in one of his quiet visits to St. Mungo's for treatment of his injury – and even more fortunate to discover the man could be easily bought.

A shame that was the easy part of this.

"And you don't remember anything?"

"Nothing after everything going white-hot," Larshall replied wearily, shaking his head. "I wish I could, but the first thing I remember is waking up in here. I thought I was dead."

"By all accounts you should have been," Kemester said, exhaling slowly as he pulled his chair a little closer to his partner's bed. "Apparently according to an analysis of the clothes you were wearing, there shouldn't have been anything left of you at all..."

"But you're here," Larshall said, his eyes brightening. "You were actually able to come and see me, and that means..."

"I'm a free man again," Kemester replied, scratching his temple, one of the few parts of his face not horribly seamed by burns. "Under watch, but otherwise exonerated. You don't think you'd be able to get any reparations for my little stint in Azkaban?"

"Considering what the Ministry's been going through, you'd be lucky to even get an apology," Larshall admitted with a sigh. "Assuming it's chaos in there?"

"The full panic in our world hasn't set in yet, but that's only a matter of time," Kemester said bitterly. "The second the Minister makes a coherent statement to the international press, all hell is going to break loose – especially considering that he'll need to prepare it in a way that allows him to salvage his career and get immunity for his office. The families of those Azkaban guards are going to be screaming for Fudge's head." Kemester looked towards the small darkened window next to the bed. "It'd be easier for him to just admit that You-Know-Who was back and Dumbledore was right, but he won't admit it as long as Dumbledore remains missing."

"He wouldn't admit guilt anyways," Larshall said with a grimace as he shifted in his bed. "So everyone in the office has accepted he's back?"

"The few I've talked to have," Kemester replied. "And yeah, no sign of Dumbledore anywhere. You know, I've got a funny feeling – I bet the old bastard's up to something. He's normally a bigger presence – that we haven't heard from him for this long..."

Larshall ran a hand over his bristly hair. "Back to the conspiracy theories, then?"

"I have evidence to back all of my theories," Kemester replied stiffly. "And besides, we do have a leak."

"I thought you considered Sanders the leak," Larshall said tiredly.

"Doesn't make sense, because if we factor You-Know-Who into matters, things become more complicated." Kemester gave Larshall a very even stare. "For instance, I read your report on the 'informant' who tipped you off regarding the Azkaban raid. Commendable report, but I could Malfoy's fingerprints all over it."

Larshall was speechless. "But... how –"

"I read between the lines. Malfoy's persona non grata right now throughout the Ministry, and any 'unknown' informant tipping you off regarding that sort of attack would either be a member of Dumbledore's group – which you would have noted in your briefing documentation you passed along to Scrimgeour – or a Death Eater." Kemester shrugged. "As for the jump to Lucius Malfoy, it just made sense."

"And you've obviously had dealings with Malfoy in the past," Larshall reasoned. "But that still doesn't rule Sanders out as a leak – he looked like he was under the Imperius Curse back at Azkaban –"

"An Imperius that wouldn't be necessary if he was the spy," Kemester continued. "And while we knew he was passing information to Umbridge –"

"But what if Umbridge is the leak?"

"That was my first thought, and it makes a degree of sense until you consider that Umbridge hasn't nearly been embroiled in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – she tends to keep her distance for the most part." Kemester's brow furrowed. "And it's all the little leaks, the little pieces, that aren't lining up – that requires a degree of subtlety I don't think she's capable of."

"She was involved with H.A.I.T. –"

"That was more political than anything," Kemester said, turning back to Larshall. "No, I'm talking about missing evidence in the Potter files – and the Black file, when you come to it – and those Umbridge has never been close to. And there are questions that still haven't been answered."

"Like what?"

"Like who killed Laertes Rawling, and why," Kemester finished, his expression stormy as he grimaced with frustration. "I don't believe Dumbledore had Sturgis Podmore kill him – it's too sloppy, Dumbledore's far more meticulous, and Podmore pointed the finger far too quickly. No, something's missing there, something we've

overlooked. And frankly, it's the only case file there's any hope in hell I'll be able to access, given all the oversight."

Larshall gave Kemester a very frank expression. "You can't exactly be surprised by that –"

Kemester glared at Larshall. "Do you want to help or what? It's a cold case, and one that might help us plug the leak before it ruins any more lives and kills any more Hit Wizards."

"And you think it's all tied together?"

"There are too many things that make no sense for it not to be –"

The door to the recovery room opened suddenly, and Kemester whirled, his hand plunging for his wand –

To see the last woman he would ever expect to enter the room, wearing a grubby brown coat, her blonde hair lank around her face and jewelled spectacles, and a very business-like expression on her face.

"I was told you were down here, Mr. Kemester," Rita Skeeter said evenly, pulling an acid-green quill from her coat. "Don't worry, I need to add another piece to your puzzle."

Larshall's eyes widened, but Kemester only snorted with disbelief. "And why would I believe anything a professional hack like you would deliver?"

Skeeter bristled. "Because two old Death Eaters burned down my flat about a month ago, and I figured you can only look for answers and theories for so long on your own before you consult a professional."

"And you're coming to me?" Kemester asked coolly, crossing his arms over his chest. "That seems... unlikely. Uncharacteristic of you."

"Mr. Kemester, you have a reputation," Skeeter replied, "and while we haven't seen eye-to-eye in the past –"

Kemester could hear his partner stifle a snort, but he didn't particularly care – it was widely known outside of the Department and the Ministry that he had little patience or courtesy for journalists of any type, and even less for Rita Skeeter. But despite himself, he was intrigued.

"How did you know they were Death Eaters?" he asked, leaning against the wall and fixing Skeeter with a critical eye.

"One of them was Fenrir Greyback," Skeeter began crisply, "and given his known affiliations –"

"He could have easily been there on werewolf business," Larshall interrupted.

"And why would the werewolves target me?" Skeeter retorted. "I believe in the stamping out of vampires, not werewolves. And besides, they mentioned You-Know-Who. They said they wanted me out of the way because of the article I did for Cassane, indicting the Ministry of its crimes."

Kemester quickly looked towards Larshall. "Want to fill me in?" he asked, his tone a mixture between shock and suppressed anger.

"Somehow, she got her hands on a bunch of files and documents," Larshall replied curtly. "She and some foreign correspondent published an article for the Supreme Mugwump Cassane demanding the Minister resigned and an investigation into your behaviour. Apparently, Cassane made contact with Potter himself, and Potter gave up everything. The article made some waves, but Fudge had plausible deniability about the whole mess and too many people were scared to ask the next round of questions. It hasn't ruined him –"

"But with whatever happened in Azkaban, it's only a matter of time," Skeeter replied smugly.

"Do you have a death wish or something?" Kemester growled through his clenched teeth. "Writing an article like that, in this political climate,

it's no surprise someone set your flat on fire! Have you considered the possibility that –"

He paused at the eager look on Skeeter's face. No, can't forget she's a reporter – I can't even make the implication that Greyback might have been paid off by someone in the Ministry, regardless if it sounds exactly like something Umbridge would do.

"In any case," he continued, his voice far more measured, "you said the Death Eaters mentioned You-Know-Who. What does that mean to you?"

Skeeter, for the first time since she had entered the room, looked visibly unsure of what she was going to say. "I...look, when Amoccio – the international correspondent – came to me with the files that he had been given, there was a statement included inside them that said You-Know-Who was back. It was from Potter, and given the political climate right now, I figured it wouldn't be the smartest idea to publish something like that in the Prophet, particularly considering the way the Ministry went after Dumbledore and Potter for holding that stance. Besides, while there was evidence in the file, there wasn't enough to make a definitive statement, at least outside of Potter's word. But now... now I don't know."

Kemester exchanged a glance with Larshall, the unspoken question hanging heavily in the air. Did they tell her what most of the Ministry had already come to accept, and was trying to keep covered up?

"Why are curious about that, anyways?" Skeeter pursued, her eyes narrowing. "Why are you so quiet? Why, is You-Know-Who –"

"If we had more evidence, Fudge would have made a statement by now," Kester replied brusquely.

"No guarantee of that," Larshall muttered, "considering how his ratings have bounced up and down –"

"Our country's not screaming for his head, so we can make the reasonable assumption that he'd make a statement – if only to be the one making the statement – if he knew that You-Know-Who was

back," Kemester replied. "As it is... well, I assume you've heard about Azkaban."

"Bits and pieces," Skeeter said slowly. "Why, is there..."

Her voice trailed off. "Oh."

"You see the problem," Kemester said coolly, stepping around the bed and closer to the reporter. "If the wizarding world, the general public, found out how dangerously weak the Ministry is right now, particularly the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, we could have a crisis on our hands – and I know you wouldn't want to enable a crisis. Right, Skeeter?"

Skeeter scowled. "I'm not an idiot, Mr. Kemester, I just want answers."

"As do I," Kemester replied, tucking his hands into his pockets as he fixed the reporter with an evaluative stare, sizing her up. "At the moment, there are far too many things that have gone unanswered, too many unmatched pieces in this puzzle – and I could use an investigative reporter who has a... fondness for the ugly truth."

"I tell it like it is."

"And that's my point," Kemester continued, glancing at Larshall. "As soon as I can help my partner get back on his feet, we're going to get at every shred of evidence we have and put this puzzle together. Now, obviously we won't be able to get everything – I don't suspect to find much new material on certain characters, and I know I won't be able to find anything on others. Those, I think, you might have more luck with."

"Dmitri, who are you referring to?" Larshall asked cautiously.

"Come on, Reed, think," Kemester replied impatiently. "I can't go asking open questions about Scrimgeour or Umbridge or Fudge or Cassane – they're prominent public figures or members of my own damn Department, and we're not going to be able to get close to them." He glanced at Skeeter. "Not the way certain reporters can."

A small grin slowly grew on Skeeter's face. "You want dirt?"

"I don't care about their dirty secrets," Kemester replied tersely, "unless they're really dirty, obviously – but I do want documentation and motivations, and connections to people. You have a reputation for getting that sort of thing."

"I do," Skeeter said with a crafty smile.

"Don't look so happy," Kemester snapped, "it's not a good reputation. In any case, Larshall and I will be working on the murder case of Laertes Rawling."

Skeeter frowned. "Who?"

"Unspeakable who was killed a few months ago," Larshall spoke up. "See, she doesn't even remember him."

"Not surprised," Kemester muttered, "the case only stayed on the public mind for nearly a day before falling off."

"What about Potter?"

Kemester snapped his gaze back to Skeeter. "What about him?"

"You've gone after him before." There was no accusation in Skeeter's tone, only truth. "I assumed he's still on your mind."

Kemester exchanged another glance with Larshall. "The problem is tracking Potter and getting close to him – he's hard to follow, and I know for a fact that some people have a vested interest in keeping him protected." The last word came from gritted teeth as he thought of Nymphadora Tonks and her collaboration with that lawyer of Potter's, Clarissa Desdame. "I've got a suspicion he was doing something with the goblins –"

"No, that's true," Skeeter interrupted evenly.

Kemester's eyes widened. "What?"

"When I was speaking to one of Potter's contacts, a Miss Fleur Delacour," Skeeter said conspiratorially, "she may have mentioned that she was passing along dealings between Mr. Potter and Gringotts. Now granted, she did say this to ensure that Potter indeed intended to pay me, but I can confirm that there was something going on –"

But Kemester wasn't listening – his mind was racing. Why on earth would Potter bomb Gringotts in August and then try to deal with the goblins? The little fiends don't forget things like that – wait a minute, that accountant Welmon said that Potter was looking for information about two dead accountants, who were apparently tied to the Potter Vaults case... and I don't remember Lucius mentioning multiple vaults when we attempted to 'transfer' his funds... that must mean he's either keeping the money isolated and out of our reach...

"Or he doesn't have access to it," he breathed, a puzzle piece finally snapping into place. "And he wants that money."

"Pardon?" Skeeter asked, her Quick-Quotes Quill rising to her lips.

"Put that away," Kemester said, his eyes wildly snapping to Larshall. "Reed, I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise, but I need to go dig up some old files. Skeeter, I need you to get in contact with that Delacour girl again and verify whether or not all of Potter's negotiations were executed."

"That might be a bit of a problem," Skeeter replied tersely. "And that's the other reason why I'm here."

"What?" Kemester demanded.

"To report a missing person, one that I think has valuable information," Skeeter replied evenly. "You see, I can't find her, and I haven't been able to for the past few months. For all intents and purposes, Fleur Delacour is gone."

For a long few minutes, none of them really spoke. Moody limped behind his desk and pulled out his kettle, filling it with water from the

tip of his wand and heating it in seconds. Tonks sat in one of the mismatched armchairs around the office, her eyes shadowed as she stared into her lap.

And Harry just stood, his mind in a daze from everything he had seen, everything he had witnessed...

He felt Moody press the mug of hot tea into his hands. "Drink."

He didn't drink. Instead, he set his mug down and watched Moody give the second mug to Tonks, who took it and continued to stare at the floor aimlessly.

"You should drink that," Moody said in a low voice, pouring himself a mug once he had limped back to his desk. "It's got herbs... help relax you."

"We can't sleep here," Tonks whispered, not looking up. "The time sink..."

"But we should talk while you're still here," Moody replied, pulling his notebook out and peeling it open to a fresh page. "We got a lot of valuable information in there."

"Did we?" Harry asked suddenly, his eyes snapping up. "Did we, Professor? Sure, I got to see my Mum and Dad and Sirius and Cassane's group, but... but ultimately, we still don't have most of the answers."

"We know what role Claudius Kemester played with Cassane's group," Moody replied steadily, his quill whizzing across the page. "He was their judge they went to for warrants and convictions –"

"And apparently a traitor, since he ended up in Azkaban," Tonks said harshly, looking up and taking a sip of her steaming tea, which she nearly spat out. "You have to wonder if Dolohov had a point in there – whether or not Voldemort was just playing us all for fools –"

"I don't buy that for one damn second," Moody retorted sharply, looking up from his book. "As much as I disapproved of what

Cassane's group did – for as much of it as we saw – they did save lives, and there were a lot of good people working with him. And besides, Dumbledore would have done something if the group was being played for Voldemort's benefit."

"But even still, we don't know everything," Harry said, a bitter note creeping into his voice. "Cassane's memories were informative, but there were huge gaps! He even admitted that – after the deaths of his family, we don't see anything else. We don't know what happened with the group, what they did, why the Potter Vaults were sealed, why Snape was involved at all, or why Kemester Senior went to prison! We just end up with more questions!"

"At this point, we can at least begin searching for answers," Moody said crisply, continuing to scribble as quickly as he could. "And I think we might have something more with the Potter Vaults."

"Really?" Tonks asked, unable to stop the sarcasm from leaking into her voice.

"We know from Dumbledore that there were four people who know the full extent to the Potter Vaults debacle," Moody replied, snapping his notebook shut and dropping it on his desk. "Two are dead, one was in Azkaban – Mr. Claudius Kemester, I would assume – and the final is Severus Snape. We know that Kemester was a judge – he was likely involved in the decision to close said vaults. Do we know who the two dead people are?"

"Miguel Prince and Keaton Matthis," Tonks replied quietly, almost to herself. "Defense and prosecuting attorneys. Lupin told me when I ran into him a few months ago."

"Fine, then that leaves Snape in some role," Moody finished, his mismatched eyes glittering. "Now he was a known Death Eater, he wouldn't have had any role in the decision-making process. I suspect he might have been called in as a witness."

"For which side?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"That's what the trial documentation would inevitably tell us and considering the fracas of paperwork that has been lost in the Ministry, both in the recent explosions and over the past fourteen years, I don't suspect we'll ever find that," Moody growled. "But what the documentation would not tell us is Keaton Matthis' motivations for pushing for a vault closure."

"Wasn't he the lawyer for the Rosiers, trying to prevent their vault from being closed?" Harry asked, his brow furrowing. "The Rosiers were Death Eaters – they could have bribed him to take the case – or maybe Matthis was a Death Eater himself."

"None of the Order intelligence ever indicated Matthis was a Death Eater," Moody replied emphatically. "Probably because he did as much damage to the Death Eater cause as he did to ours. He was a freelance financial lawyer, from what I remember – too full of himself to work for a firm, he sold his skills to the highest bidder – and given that he was actually pretty damned good at his job, he made himself very rich doing so, so I doubt his motivations were for the money."

"What about this Miguel Prince?" Harry asked, his gaze darting from Tonks to Moody. "Remember anything about him?"

"Other than the fact every case I remember him being involved with was a disaster," Moody replied with a snort, "nothing much. He was also freelance – but unlike Matthis, it was more because no other firm would hire him other than the Ministry."

"So it sounds like Matthis would have had no trouble crushing Prince in court," Tonks said, her hair going yellow-blond and curly as she frowned. "But if Kemester was a judge working with Cassane, why would he turn on your parents?"

"Maybe because he was a Death Eater and with the Dark Lord gone, he was looking for an opportunity to get even?" Harry returned, grasping his temples with frustration. "It's the obvious answer."

"But it doesn't make any sense, Harry," Tonks argued. "If Kemester was a Death Eater, why didn't he do something to bring down Cassane's group earlier? He could have made their lives a living hell,

but instead he was probably their greatest supporter within the Ministry, with the warrants and everything. Hell, both of his sons grew up to be Hit Wizards! It doesn't make a damn bit of sense that he would turn out to be one of Voldemort's active sympathizers. If he was just under Imperius or blackmail or coercion, he would have easily escaped Azkaban – hell, the Malfoys did!"

"Unless he was an exceedingly good actor –"

"Still doesn't give a reason why he didn't act sooner –"

"Unless, Tonks, Voldemort got him after the summer of 1979 –"

"Tonks has a point, Harry," Moody interrupted, his electric blue eye whirling down towards the closed book on the desk as his beady black eye focused on Harry. "Every time I met Claudius Kemester – and despite the fact he was an abrasive, caustic, and rather cold individual, almost tyrannical – but I never doubted that he was a firm supporter of the law. I didn't understand why he was sent to Azkaban – it happened very quickly, in the flurry of events around the Longbottom attacks, and I was occupied elsewhere. He might be our biggest lead."

"That's assuming we can get him out of his coma," Harry replied, raking a hand through his hair as he finally picked up his mug and took a sip of tea. "And with Matthis and Prince dead, that only leaves one person left who – if Dumbledore was right – knows the whole truth."

Moody grimaced. "Snape. The last time I saw him was the night before the Ministry attack – he vanished the same time Dumbledore did."

"Do you think their disappearances are tied together?" Tonks murmured, raising a finger. "You know, maybe they're on a mission together or something? I mean, the last time I saw him was when he accidentally rescued me at the Ministry – he thought he was rescuing Harry –"

"I dunno, Tonks, that doesn't make a lot of sense," Harry replied with a frown of his own as he took another sip of tea. "Dumbledore would have left us something, or at least indicated a substitute for Snape's class rather than have McGonagall appoint one if the two are just going off on a mission."

"You honestly think that Dumbledore would bother with something so trivial –"

"It makes sense when we consider when Umbridge was thrown out, I was called in," Moody replied, raising his hands with exasperation. "No, Dumbledore would have said something if the two of them were planning a mission. Snape... I reckon he's either with the Death Eaters or on his own somewhere."

"Except that none of us saw him at the Azkaban attack," Harry pointed out.

"Doesn't mean he wasn't there –"

"Snape's a tricky bastard," Moody interrupted, "so even if he wasn't at Azkaban, he could be elsewhere. He could be anywhere."

"Still probably worth searching his office," Harry argued. "If he kept notes, information about his plans – he had to have left something behind." He turned to the old ex-Auror. "Hell, Crouch Junior used to 'search his office' all the time last year."

Moody snorted as he finished the rest of his tea. "And who would have thought I would be following in his footsteps?"

The intricate magical diagram would have covered a dozen rooms if he had chosen to let it unfold in its grand design – but he did not require such extravagance. Each line traced, he knew its purpose. Each fold conserving space did not exist in his mental picture – he could see it all.

And with Bellatrix's unique ideas – which he trimmed to something far more useful and much less gratuitous – he now had the final missing links.

"This will be difficult to accomplish, Bella," he finally said, setting down his wand and causing the glittering magical diagram to vanish into smoke with a thought.

"But glorious in its conclusion," she breathed, her eyes blazing in their sockets, even further shadowed by the long hours awake. "Another link to your grand plans for our world."

"I have no doubts of my own abilities, Bellatrix," Voldemort said sharply, giving his Death Eater a scornful look, "but such a plan like this requires extraordinary timing, and the abilities of others to operate at a very high level."

Bellatrix's expression hardened. "I can provide any additional impetus for them to fulfill your will –"

"There are some things even fear cannot control," Voldemort replied quietly, "and one of those things is time. And with time comes chaos, hand in hand – and magic can only bring so much order before being subsumed." The Dark Lord turned to the back of the room, where an unremarkable wooden crate was shrouded in shadow. "Even with the purest magic, harvested from thousands of wands, chaos can only be defeated for a time. Death is a far easier opponent."

He could tell that Bellatrix did not know what to say, but he didn't care. Despite her creative brilliance, these concepts were on a very different level – one that would always remain far beyond her reach.

He heard the scuffle on the stairs, but he did not look up. Instead, he turned back to the Book of Inversion and Duplex and slowly turned the page, scanning every line, equation, and diagram with extreme precision.

"My Lord, I have the books."

"All of them, Antonin?" Voldemort asked quietly, still not turning. "Did you run into any difficulties?"

"They're fairly innocuous texts, my Lord," Antonin Dolohov replied with a short bow as he set the four books down on the table. "Nothing all that special."

At the sound of the leather covers touching the stone, Voldemort finally turned. He could hear the faint rustling of the blades within Blood and Astral Projection: A Thesis, but he easily tuned out the noise as he looked at the three remaining books.

An old musty copy of Consciousness Conjunctions. A pristine, hardly-used copy of The Study of Age and Magic. And a battered, dog-eared copy of Metamagical Extrabiology: An Examination.

"I now possess all five books required for simulamancy," Voldemort said softly, fixing Bellatrix and Dolohov with a steely expression, "and despite dear Severus'... disappearance, I feel quite comfortable in stating that the potions will not prove difficult. However, I lack a key ingredient for this ritual."

Bellatrix's eyes were wild as she licked her lips. "Say the word, my Lord, and I will have my wretched niece on the floor at your feet –"

"Your enthusiasm is admirable, Bellatrix... but it is unnecessary," Voldemort replied smoothly, ignoring the slight twitch on Dolohov's face at Bellatrix's words. Perhaps he is not as strong as I had hoped... no matter, that will soon be remedied. "I have no desire to attempt the simulamancy ritual, only to understand it."

"It would make sense to remove the Metamorphmagus," Dolohov said calmly. "After all, given how much trouble she's caused –"

"She will play her part in the upcoming events, just as I have planned, Antonin," Voldemort interrupted softly. "No, our efforts are better focused elsewhere. Bellatrix will stay here and work with me to refine this ritual – but I have an important task for you, Antonin."

Dolohov raised an eyebrow, but gave no reply.

"Contact Barnabus Cuffe, and inform him that he has a job to do."

"Anything else, my Lord?"

His lipless mouth formed a small, satisfied grin. "No, he'll understand."

"You'd think," Moody finally said, looking up from Snape's now empty trunk at the heap of books laying on the floor, "that a professor and former Death Eater would have more personal effects other than books and paperwork."

"Just because you cart around all those Dark Detectors doesn't mean the rest of the world does, Mad-Eye," Tonks replied distractedly as she rifled through another stack of papers neatly stacked on Snape's personal desk. "Besides, considering how much Snape was on the move, I'm not surprised we can't find much."

"But even I keep records!" Moody snapped, shoving yet another theoretical Potions text aside as he picked up another few unmarked books. "Snape has left nothing – nothing! Besides Potions ingredients and incomprehensible notes, the man's left nothing to make himself remotely traceable. No forwarding addresses, no bills or notifications, no paperwork, not even a damn journal!"

"He certainly tore out of here in a hurry," Tonks muttered, her hair going acid-green as she set down the papers. "I mean, he left all this stuff behind –"

"Aha!"

Moody's blue eye snapped up to Harry, who had just emerged from Snape's old private bathroom adjacent to his quarters. "What are you – is that shampoo?"

"Yep," Harry replied, tossing the bottle to an astonished Tonks. "And the bottle's nearly empty – guess he did use it after all."

Tonks snorted. "You have no proof of that. He could have just been emptying it down the drain –"

"Uh huh, why don't you just pay up?"

Moody made a disapproving noise from the back of his throat as he flipped through the books with a vengeance, his blue eye watching as Tonks begrudgingly handed Harry a few Sickles.

"So, any luck?" Harry asked hopefully.

Moody snorted, and Tonks shook her head. "Nothing even close," she added, her hair darkening.

"Shouldn't there be, I dunno, correspondence from the Order that Snape would have received?" Harry asked as he picked up another unmarked book and began scanning it. "Something with an address?"

"Nah, Snape's too smart for that," Moody replied curtly. "He'd have burnt all the papers after reading, and all of the envelopes sent from the Order were unmarked – he never gave us an address, either."

"That doesn't make a damn bit of sense," Tonks said with frustration, tossing a stack of papers on the floor. "Look, I know the primary way we contacted him was through Patronuses or the occasional message to Hogwarts, but he would have had to give something, even for emergencies –"

"Not if he didn't want to be found by either side," Harry muttered, tossing the book on the floor. "You'd think, though, that Hogwarts would at least have something..."

"That's it!"

Both of Moody's eyes snapped up at Tonks' triumphant exclamation. "What's it?"

"Hogwarts would have to have a record of where Snape lived," Tonks said, her smile broadening as her hair lightened again. "I mean, after all, didn't he get paid?"

"That only means he would have needed to give Hogwarts a Gringotts account number, Tonks." Moody suddenly paused, and an incredulous expression emerged on his face. "Are you suggesting that the goblins would have paperwork on record with his location?"

"Ten-to-one odds those papers are falsified," Harry muttered.

Tonks, however, was undaunted. "Okay, fine, maybe Gringotts doesn't have everything, but he was a legitimate employee at Hogwarts, and that means he collected a salary, and which means –"

"He paid taxes," Moody finished, a dark expression on his face.

Harry's face fell slightly. "Wait a second... you're telling me –"

"When you get a paying job, Potter, you'll understand," Moody replied brusquely, rising to his feet. "Wizarding taxes go through the Department of Magical Finance –"

"Which has always been offsite of the Ministry at a separate location in downtown London," Tonks said excitedly, "so it's likely most of the paperwork – which will include a physical address, which he would have needed to provide for tax purposes – is intact!"

"And it also means," Moody replied grimly, "that you're not getting any paperwork out of there without a subpoena. Peter O'Sanden – that's the Head of the Department, for your information, Potter – is a stickler for that, and we have no idea where he stands politically, other than that he has a passable relationship with Scrimgeour."

"Which could mean anything," Harry finished heavily, sinking into one of the few uncomfortable wooden chairs in the room. His eyes brightened. "We do have Fleur, though – she works in the Department of Magical Finance. She'd have an alibi."

"And you'd be asking her to take one hell of a risk," Moody said grimly, setting the last of Snape's books down on the desk. "Delacour's an international citizen and only part-human... at best, she'd be deported if she was caught, and even Cassane's clout wouldn't be enough to save her from the worst."

"She's helped us before –"

"Harry, filing a tax audit is a hell of a lot different than looking into private files, particularly those of a former Death Eater," Tonks replied, pursing her lips as her hair slipped to turquoise. "If she didn't know what to say or who to say it to, she'd be exposed – or worse, tip off the wrong people that somebody's looking."

"We could help her..."

But a smile was spreading across Tonks' face – a devious smile – as her hair turned silvery-blond. "I think," she said, "I've got a better idea."

"You're back from St. Mungo's." It was not a question, just a simple statement of fact.

Lucius Malfoy nodded. "Antonin, could I have a word with you?"

Dolohov's lip twitched, on the verge of a smile. "Need something, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's eyes darkened as he stiffened his posture as the two slipped into a well-appointed side room. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you do – I'm smart, creative, good-looking, and a hell of a lot more lethal than you are," Dolohov replied primly, closing the door behind them and leaning on it, his smile insouciant. "And I can tell by the look on your face that this is just killing you to ask for something, so let's save you the agony."

"I'm currently in great pain, Antonin," Malfoy hissed through gritted teeth.

"And as I'm sure you realize, that statement is utterly pointless as I do not care about your flambéed genetalia," Dolohov replied with a shrug. "Talk."

"Are you interested in a vacation, Antonin?"

Dolohov's eyes lit up, and he let the smile blossom on his face. "Really? I'm touched, Lucius, that you'd think of me like that. Where are we going? I hope it's the Caribbean, I've heard such wonderful things –"

"You misunderstand me," Malfoy interrupted, his eyes flashing with either pain or anger, Dolohov really couldn't tell. "I'm speaking of something like an exodus, per se. A way out."

The smile vanished in an instant, and there was silence for a long few seconds.

Dolohov let out a slow whistle. "I tell you, Lucius, even though your balls have been nicely roasted, you still have them."

Lucius' nodded grimly. "And I have waited long enough – and I could always use an extra hand, particularly one with nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"You have a peculiar definition of 'nothing', Malfoy," Dolohov said, scratching his chin idly.

Malfoy was undaunted. "There's nothing of significance for you here, Dolohov, and you know that as well as I. Your servitude has given you little reward."

"And do you think for an instant that if I had an option besides sweet, sweet damnation, I would not have taken it?" Dolohov retorted, his eyes hardening. "It doesn't work like that, Malfoy – you know that as well as I."

"You could be free –"

"I haven't been free for seventeen years," Dolohov interrupted harshly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why the change of heart, Lucius? Should I draw my wand, so we can settle this like men instead of like the cowards I scrape off my shoes?"

"I only seek to disappear."

"And you think you'll get away?" Dolohov's laugh was loud, barking, and filled with contempt. "Run fast and run far, Lucius Malfoy, but there's a tattoo on your arm just the same as mine. He'll find you – and even I am not that foolish to cross him."

Malfoy paused, and then took a deep breath, disguising it as a sniff of disdain. "I'll take that risk."

"Then you'll take it alone," Dolohov replied with a shrug. "I'm not that stupid. Even considering everything I've lost... yeah, I'm still not that stupid. Why the precipitous drop in intelligence, Lucius? Your brains located in your penis rather than your skull?"

"I'm doing this for my family," Malfoy replied, his voice low and dangerous as he stalked forward. Dolohov tensed, but Malfoy only seized the doorknob, wrenching it open. "So we can have something left at the end of it all. You, of all people, should understand that."

Dolohov paused as the door slammed shut, and then he shook his head, his eyes glittering. "Oh, you did not just go there."

"You know I'm taking an awful risk with this – I hope you realize that."

The man sitting opposite said nothing – there was nothing to be said, nothing that wasn't already explicitly laid out on the long sheaf of parchment now lying on the desk between them. Very proper, very formal, and even very legal – at least for the most part.

That was the point, after all – Lucius Malfoy was not a man to leave ends that had not been tidied up.

"An awful risk," the balding man repeated, straightening his spectacles as he continued to scan the parchment, noting every figure on every line. "An awful risk indeed."

"Is there an issue of obvious illegality?" Lucius asked crisply, toying with the silver head of his cane.

"Willard Parkinson himself handled those loopholes, if that's what you're asking."

"Is there an issue with procedure?"

"It will take some time for the paperwork and the finances to be processed – more time than usual, considering you desire discreetness – albeit slightly easier as you are not going through Gringotts anymore." The balding man looked at Lucius over the top of his spectacles. "And considering I wrote the majority of the procedural measures applying to the bank we started, it should not be an issue."

"Then what is the problem?" Lucius asked, keeping his voice extremely even, only letting a trace of irritation come into his expression.

Peter O'Sanden, Head of the Department of Magical Finance, set the parchment down. "Lucius Malfoy, you do realize you are dead."

That wasn't exactly what he was expecting. "I beg your pardon?"

"Legally, I mean," O'Sanden clarified smoothly, weighing the curling edge of the parchment down with a glass paperweight as he pulled an ornately carved bottle of ink from a drawer in his desk that opened silently at his touch. "As you are undoubtedly aware, the unsteady peace we have achieved with the goblins, thus allowing a modicum of negotiation with the creatures, was earned on the assumption that we had your family, ah, removed."

It rankled to hear the man say it, but Lucius clenched his jaw – he wasn't about to forget about that injustice, but now was not the time for petty revenge. "And?"

"Well, given your family's status and the financial complications that ensued, what with the new bank and the Ministry bombings and the goblins, there will need to be a certain dexterity on the part of my people in getting these papers through without undue scrutiny," O'Sanden finished, withdrawing a quill from the same drawer and tapping its tip to the lid of the ink bottle, which vanished instantly. "I will have to rely on my best people, whose services do not come cheap."

"I have plenty of gold," Lucius said stiffly.

"Gold only goes so far," O'Sanden replied, tapping a long finger twice on the parchment. "And so does necessary confidentiality – particularly in your case, where you want things arranged in multiple countries. Keep in mind this is no mere filing procedure, Mr. Malfoy – the Department of International Magical Co-Operation may have to be drawn into this."

"You're the interim Head of that Department," Lucius pointed out stonily.

"And so I am," O'Sanden agreed smoothly, "but even I will not be able to deflect all scrutiny."

Lucius took a slow, steady breath. "Mr. O'Sanden, I understand your qualms and your arguments, but I have taken a large enough risk arriving here today, so I would encourage you to get to the point. What do you want?"

"At least three months of time, and a thousand Galleons up front," O'Sanden replied, finally meeting Lucius' icy grey eyes with a blank, hard stare the Death Eater knew the man had mastered. "Likely four months – it will take time to discreetly make sure the paperwork is filed and processed in a manner that does not attract attention."

Lucius clenched his fist with frustration. A thousand Galleons was a lot of gold, but he could absorb that loss easily. Four months, on the other hand... "Is there anything else?" he growled.

"I'll need signatures from your entire family, Parkinson's guarantee his firm will legally block any challenge or question that may implicate the Department of Magical Finance in of this, and written assurance from you that once you are out of this country, you will never come back," O'Sanden said, his voice never rising above its brisk, even tone. "While doing business with you is lucrative, Mr. Malfoy, it is hardly conducive to one's digestion."

"This is extortion," Lucius hissed. "Why shouldn't I just –"

"Because, Mr. Malfoy, your threats have about as much weight as an empty bucket made of air," O'Sanden replied, carefully signing the bottom of the parchment with a meticulously blank expression. "You need me, and unless you have in your possession some Herculean magic that will bind me to your command, you must ensure my protection and that of my staff, or else you will be far worse off."

He nearly raised his voice to protest – but then a funny little idea came into his mind, and he closed his mouth. He still glared at the insufferable man – mustn't give anything away...

"Very well," Lucius said coolly, rising to his feet, setting his cane behind his back as he fiddled silently with the silver head, carefully working it loose. "I will be Obliviating your secretary – I'm assuming you don't mind?"

O'Sanden waved his hand dismissively and looked back down at the parchment, absorbed in the legalese –

He didn't stand a chance.

"Imperio!"

O'Sanden's jaw went slack as Lucius stalked closer, leaning close to the balding man as he placed his wand against O'Sanden's ear.

"I will justly compensate you for your hard work," Lucius said softly, "but you will not exploit my family – those times are over. You will continue to go about your business in the timeframe you specified – after all, I do understand the need for discretion – but you will not cross me, or leak the truth to your old friend Scrimgeour, or do anything to tip off the Ministry or Gringotts. You will hardly even feel my control if you cooperate. Do you understand?"

"Yes," O'Sanden murmured tonelessly, and Lucius marvelled how much O'Sanden's tone hadn't changed under the curse. Nobody will suspect anything... particularly that he is being controlled by a dead man...

Without another word, Lucius withdrew his wand and effortlessly Disillusioned himself. It would be a tricky task to sneak out of the Department of Magical Finance without being noticed, but he was confident that he would be able to escape detection. A quick Memory Charm for the attractive brunette secretary in the office foyer, a side route around the cubicles to where the protective enchantments – and Anti-Apparition jinx – ended, and he could easily disappear

Another segment of my plan completed – and now the hardest part of all: the wait.

"I don't understand why we couldn't have met in your office," Rita Skeeter complained, sidling into the tiny booth and glaring at the scarred Hit Wizard getting in opposite her.

"Yeah, and have you anywhere close to my personal case files?" Kemester retorted. "Not a chance in hell."

"So a Muggle bar?" Rita continued incredulously. "In downtown London? At ten in the morning? We're an Apparition away from Diagon Alley, and –"

"Both of us attract a fair amount of attention, Ms. Skeeter," Kemester said curtly, fidgeting with his tie roughly with his hand and wincing at the rush of pain as he moved his fingers. He knew the Muggle suit didn't look particularly good on him, with the horrific scars across his face and hands, but a simple charm he knew would give to Muggles the appearance of a healthy man, albeit a very ugly one. "Here, I can attract less. And you can't use your Quick-Quotes Quill, so it's another bonus for me."

Rita glared daggers at the Hit Wizard, but then simply sniffed with disdain. Kemester knew that she was holding back comments, but he also knew anything he would give her was too good to pass up. She smoothed out her long dark coat and looked carefully around the bar. "Do you suspect we've been followed?"

"Unlikely," Kemester replied coldly, motioning for the waitress to approach. "Rye straight – what do you want, Rita?"

"Water, please," she quickly said, fixing Kemester with another acrid glare. "I don't drink when I'm building a case – or this early in the day."

Kemester shrugged. "Your loss."

"You certainly cleaned up better than expected," Rita noted, rolling her eyes as she took in the ill-fitting suit.

Kemester shrugged. "Better than most wizards would – and besides, I'm a Hit Wizard, we have some training about going incognito. This way, to everyone else here, we're a businessman and businesswoman engaging in professional conversation in a London bar."

"Is your partner joining us?"

"No," Kemester replied curtly, reaching into his suit jacket pocket and pulling out a thick sheaf of files that could not have regularly fit inside of it. "Undetectable Extension Charm, Ms. Skeeter."

Rita just snorted. "Would have looked more convincing if you had just brought a damn briefcase, you know. So which of us goes first?"

Kemester smirked – although with all of the scars seaming his face, it could have easily passed for a grimace. "You, obviously. I'm the one investigating this, after all."

"Not legitimately," Rita said smugly.

"As long as I keep my little training job and my head away from the Potter file or anything related to last November with the bombings, they don't particularly care what I'm looking at," Kemester returned curtly. "The Department's overworked as it is right now. So what did you find out?"

Rita scowled, and then pulled out a tiny reporter's pad from her coat and flipped it open. "Laertes Rawling, born September 21st, 1952, halfblood. Ravenclaw at Hogwarts, graduated with unremarkably good grades, became a fully qualified Unspeakable in '71. Only child, parents died in the 80s, no wife or children, Apparated daily from an apartment in Kent to work in London. Died in October last year, apparently at the hands of one Sturgis Podmore."

Kemester snorted. "Completely unremarkable. Anything else?"

"I found his apartment – already had been emptied a month ago when the landlord discovered that dead people don't pay rent," Rita replied biting. "Your turn."

Kemester flipped open the first case file in his hands. "Everything you already said, plus more. From the papers that were declassified and that I could get my hands on, his work apparently involved studying something called 'The Veil' in the Department of Mysteries. I have no bloody clue what that is – apparently it has something to do with death or something, everything I could find that he wrote was so blacked out and classified that I couldn't make heads or tails out of it."

"Well, that's completely uninteresting – anything else, like circumstances of his death?"

Kemester ran a hand through his orange hair as the waitress returned with their drinks. He tossed a few crumpled Muggle notes to her as he returned to the file. "They apparently found his body on the floor of the hallway leading to the Department of Mysteries, and from the way he was sprawled, it looked as though the murderer had nailed him with a Killing Curse in midstride." He took a swig of the rye and nearly spat it back out. "By Merlin, this stuff is terrible –"

"You ordered it," Rita retorted, taking a sip of her own water, "and you didn't specify the brand. She probably grabbed the cheapest of the lot. But back to Rawling's death – apparently, everything I've seen suggests Sturgis Podmore killed him. How did they confirm that?"

"They caught him running, and from there, it was *Priori Incantatem*," Kemester replied, closing the file and setting it on the table so he could open the next in the stack. "Easy way to identify him – but things started getting murky when one asks why he did it."

"I thought it was because he was under Dumbledore's orders or something," Rita said suspiciously. "At least that was reported through the Prophet –"

Kemester gave her a look full of frank disbelief. "And you believed that?"

"Of course not – I know where the Prophet stood around that time – but apparently Podmore confessed." She shook her head. "You don't get much clearer data than that."

"Except for this," Kemester said, pulling a paper from the file and sliding it across the table to Rita. "That's from Umbridge's fourth report on what she deemed as the 'Order of the Phoenix conspiracy' – namely that she suspected the Order had reformed in secret after Potter and Dumbledore started proclaiming You-Know-Who was back. So she had a few of her people keep eyes on what was going on, and

apparently, according to this, Rawling was in good favour with Dumbledore."

"We're relying on Umbridge's intelligence?" Rita spat incredulously. "Forgive my suspicions, but –"

"Sanders was the one that apparently signed off on this," Kemester said curtly, pointing down at the bottom of the paper. "And given he was halfway reliable... I suspect the information is legitimate."

"Then that raises the question why Dumbledore would have had Rawling killed in the first place," Rita said after a few long seconds of thought. "It doesn't make sense – and particularly considering the kill was so damn sloppy. Even if we buy that Dumbledore was behind it – which doesn't make much sense – wouldn't he have more discretion?"

"That would be the idea," Kemester replied darkly, tucking the paper back into the file. "Which makes me think that Mr. Podmore was either acting under his own motivations or was coerced or bewitched into killing Rawling – and given his personnel file, I don't think I could consider this guy capable of murder. I mean, he was a Healer in the First War, and from what I've seen on file, he was as far away from combat as he could possibly get!"

"So you're saying he was coerced into this?" Rita asked, her eyes lighting up at the hint of conspiracy.

"I don't think there is any doubt of that," Kemester replied quietly, "but the questions then become 'who' and 'why'." He cast a look around the bar and lowered his voice. "I need to swear you to absolute secrecy on this matter – it's a matter of Ministry security."

Rita snorted. "I'm flattered," she began caustically, "that you just made the assumption I would need to be sworn to –"

"I'm not an idiot, Skeeter."

Rita rolled her eyes. "Point taken. Fine, I swear – what's the scoop?"

Kemester cast another uneasy look around the bar and then lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper. "You know most of the Ministry now suspects that You-Know-Who has returned."

Rita nodded once. "So?"

"Well, what you probably don't know is that there has been a leak within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and information has gone missing, likely passing to You-Know-Who." Kemester clenched his scarred hand into a fist. "I've been trying to track down the leak, with not a lot of success. Sure, Sanders was under the Imperius Curse, but he wouldn't have had enough reach to leak everything. Besides, as I said before, he was on Umbridge's payroll, and nobody really trusted him completely."

"So you're saying that leak could be responsible for coercing Podmore," Rita murmured slowly, connecting the dots. "Okay, but what's his angle? Why kill Rawling?"

"Deprive Dumbledore of people in the Department of Mysteries? If You-Know-Who's involved, it makes sense —"

"Except Dumbledore's probably smart enough to have a back-up agent in the Department already," Rita interrupted, drumming her long fingernails on the table. "Maybe Rawling found out about the leak, and needed to be silenced — or hell, maybe someone wanted his work in the Department of Mysteries to be stopped, I dunno..."

"Either way, certain files will need to be acquired, and I wouldn't mind doing a once-over on Rawling's possessions," Kemester finished, tucking the papers back into the file. "Assuming the leak hasn't already covered that angle."

"And why does that involve me?"

"Because I want you to be the one to track down Rawling's personal effects," Kemester replied, a slow grin appearing on his face. "I can get you hair and blood samples, if you need them —"

"His stuff was thrown out!" Rita snarled, her nose wrinkling with disgust. "I don't want to be digging through garbage –"

"Oh, I'm sorry, considering the reporting you do, I made the assumption you'd be used to it," Kemester retorted, shoving the files back inside his jacket, where they vanished instantly. There was only a single file remaining on the table – the thinnest one of all. "But considering you'll have the exclusive scoop, I assume it's worth it."

Rita glowered at him, before downing the rest of her water in a single gulp and setting the glass down with an audible thunk. "Fine, I'll do it. So what's that file for?"

"The missing-persons report that I started for Fleur Delacour," Kemester replied evenly, flipping it open. "I figured since you were probably one of the last people to see her, you'd be willing to give me a hand."

"I already told you everything –"

"You told me that she was funnelling information between Potter and the goblins, that they were negotiating something, and that you weren't sure if everything has been processed," Kemester interrupted, taking a larger sip of his rye and scowling with distaste. "I need to know more than that. I checked with the Department of International Magical Co-Operation, and according to them, she hasn't left the country. And that means we need to do some digging."

"I remember hearing that she used to work at Gringotts," Rita said after a few seconds of thinking. "That's why she has the goblin contacts. Apparently she has some job at the Department of Magical Finance, if I remember correctly –"

Kemester snapped the file closed and quickly downed the remaining rye in his glass. "All right, so we have a place to start digging. How well do you know downtown Muggle London?"

"Decently," Rita replied cautiously. "Kemester, what's your plan?"

"You go in and start asking questions," Kemester replied crisply, rising to his feet and straightening his suit jacket. "I provide your pass and clearance inside and any background support in case things get nasty."

"But if Delacour was working at the Department, why didn't one of her coworkers file the missing-persons report?" Rita asked slowly, getting to her feet and buttoning her coat.

"That's the other thing," Kemester growled, "that we need to find out. Move – I want this done in time for lunch."

The Church of St. Michael was a very old building, rebuilt after the Great London Fire, but while it had once stood tall, it was now overshadowed by the skyscrapers surrounding it, only accessible by an unassuming front entrance and a small, relatively quiet alleyway that was easy to overlook.

Nobody saw the two professionally dressed women slip out of the shadows of the courtyard and walk briskly down the alley, towards Cornhill Street. Both were blonde, and could almost be mistaken for sisters, but from their business-like attire and hard-edged stare, it would take a confident man indeed to approach them.

They crossed Cornhill Street quickly, and headed down Finch Lane. An observant man at this point would have noticed that neither woman gave the Louis Vuitton store on the corner of Finch and Cornhill a second glance – which one might consider strange, considering their relatively expensive attire.

But then again, most women wouldn't cut down Finch Lane, a dark, heavily shadowed road lined by high stone buildings, darkened windows, and culvert strewn with garbage. Even with the dense population of downtown, it was not a lane that appeared safe.

It only took them a few minutes to cross the darkened lane, but instead of continuing towards one of the banks or the London Stock Exchange just a few minutes away, they moved directly to their right, a well-appointed old building known as the Threadneedles Hotel – well-known for being one of the best hotels in the world.

The taller woman, whose hair seemed to flicker to a light brunette as they moved inside, approached the front desk. "I'm here to pick up the key for Ms. Vuneren," she said in a cold, commanding voice.

The attendant at the desk looked down at her ledger, not even noticing the subtle wave of a wand behind her high counter. "It... it seems like everything's in order." She handed the woman a keycard and gestured towards the elevators. "Your room should be ready, ma'am."

"Good," the woman replied, gesturing for her companion to hold the elevator as they ducked inside, riding it in silence to the very top floor. Getting off on that floor, they hurried down the hall to the door of their room.

The woman abruptly gave the electronic key to her companion. "You do it."

"You're telling me you don't know how –"

The woman reddened as she drew her wand. "Just do it, already."

The companion sighed, and swiped the key. The woman muttered a few words and waved her wand again, subtly disabling the protective enchantments that surrounded the room.

A harassed male voice shouted from the room. "What?"

"We're here, Sirius," the woman replied, glancing at her companion and rolling her eyes as they let themselves into the room and hastily shut the door behind them. Instantly, the woman's hair went bubblegum pink. "Thought you knew we were coming..."

"I did, I did!" Sirius protested, looking up from a pile of papers strewn all across the beds and tables. Each paper was filled to the margins with equations, notes, and intricately drawn maps. "It's just that this is going to be tricky enough as it is, Tonks, we'll need to be really careful if we want to pull this off."

"We broke into Gringotts, Sirius," Harry replied tiredly from his simulacrum as he placed the key on top of the boxy television – which wasn't working, considering the sheaths of enchantments Sirius had placed on the room. "The Department of Magical Finance shouldn't be that difficult."

"That was different," Sirius said tersely, running a hand through his unkempt hair as Tonks picked up the maps and began scanning them intently. "The Department of Magical Finance is located inside a Muggle building –"

"Yeah, the missing thirteenth floor of the London Stock Exchange," Tonks cut him off, flipping to the next map and reading it intently. "We get on the elevators, push the right buttons in the right order, and we're there without issues. It's easy –"

"Yeah, except when you realize that getting out is an entirely different endeavour," Sirius pointed out, gesturing out the window to the massive stone building that housed the London Stock Exchange. "This isn't Diagon Alley where you can use magic openly if you want to get out – you have to be discreet. Plus, with the Muggle IRA bombing six years ago in the visitors' gallery, if something causes a major commotion, they'll have a lockdown procedure in place – and that doesn't even begin to cover what would happen if there was a magical disturbance!"

"How did you find out about the bombing?" Harry asked curiously.

"Did a bit of research in a Muggle library last night after Tonks sent her Patronus telling me you two were planning on breaking in there," Sirius replied dismissively, waving away Harry's shocked look. "Don't worry, the break-in was painless, I was Disillusioned the entire time, and nobody saw me regardless."

Harry let out a sigh of relief, but he still glared at his godfather, who was failing spectacularly to look remotely innocent. "Regardless, I'm assuming you've been trying to find a way to work around all the security."

Sirius smirked. "Well, hopefully this will be as easy as you two think it will – get in, get the addresses, get out – but in case something does go wrong and you need to get out of there, I've placed a few charms on the windows of where the thirteenth floor would be, if you could see it from the outside, since the entrances will be sealed, and I'm guessing the Floo Network and Apparition won't work."

"Between the twelfth and the fourteenth, I'm assuming," Harry reasoned.

"Actually, between the seventeenth and eighteenth floors – hey, don't look at me like that, magic can be weird like that!" Sirius said hastily, raising his hands in surrender. "Anyways, if you hit them with a spell, the charms will let me know that you're coming. If a window breaks and you go through it, I've got a spell that will slide you straight here, thanks to the powers of solidified air, gravity, and my prodigious concentration."

"Wouldn't a Portkey make it easier?" Tonks asked with a frown as she set down her papers and began toying with her hair. "I mean, this seems an awful lot of work –"

"Portkeys require timing you might not have," Sirius replied with a shrug, "and this way you're guaranteed to bypass any enchantments that could stop them. All you need to do is get to the windows – any windows, thanks to the charm – and you'll have a way out."

"That assumes the windows aren't spelled shut," Harry pointed out.

Sirius shook his head. "Assuming they make the connection and spell them shut – most people aren't nuts enough to leap out the window in the middle of January. But even still, my charms will unravel those with one touch of your spell on them." He gave them a smile. "See? Easy!"

"Okay, that could work," Harry conceded, "but that still doesn't solve our biggest problem." He turned to Tonks. "Namely that you're not a Veela."

Tonks smirked. "That's what spells are for, Harry. I've got a little charm up my sleeve that should do the trick. Besides, Fleur was only part-Veela – being drop-dead gorgeous will get me past anything my charm won't stop."

Harry let out a long slow breath. "Okay, then. Let's get this done."

One step closer to the Potter Vaults... and figuring out everything in this mess.

Suddenly, he knew the truth.

He could see them – all of them – for what they were. Despite everything they had said, consoling him otherwise, he could see right through them. Right through their lies, their deceptions, their smiles and assurances.

It was unclean. It was unholy.

"Ernie?"

He snapped up, and he saw Binns still at the front of the room, droning on and on about giant wars – wars that he had already read about when he had studied on all those long nights. The nights when hardly anyone at Hogwarts could sleep. Nights where Dreamless Sleep potions only got one so far...

They were poisons, not potions. A subtle toxin, lulling one beneath the blankets of blissful ignorance... but no more. He was aware now, of the taint, of the corruption pouring like rivers of rot across the school – no, not a school, a breeding pit for evil incarnate...

"Ernie?" Hannah Abbott asked with concern, snapping her fingers. "You awake? You listening?"

Oh, he was listening. He could hear them all. He could hear their frantic, terrified souls, clutching the bars forged of ignorance and lies, quaking for the chance to be set free, seeking that holy reprieve...

And he was ready. He had felt the presence of the student, but now the teacher had arrived, his words born of fire in the belly and spirit on his tongue.

And they would never know. The preacher had been silenced for half a millennia, but the silence would be broken, and the clarion trumpets would ring, and the heretics and witches would burn...

Ernie blinked twice, looked at Hannah, and gave her a warm smile. "I'm awake, Hannah."

"Are you okay?"

And all of those who would not accept the freedom and truth that he gave would taste nothing more than the wrath of the Creator, the purifying scourge, the Light which consumes evil utterly, and leaves only the pure behind...

Thus it had been written, and thus it would be done...

He nodded, his smile never wavering. "Never been better."

Harry couldn't help but feel a strong sense of déjà vu the second they entered the London Stock Exchange. The doors were not nearly as imposing, and there were no goblin guards, but the stakes were just as high. He held the door for Tonks and set off across the foyer, keeping a chill, business-like expression fixed upon his simulacrum's face.

"You should really relax," Tonks muttered, now effortlessly wearing the face of Fleur , Delacour as she tossed her shimmering blonde hair back over her shoulder. "You look like you're going to piss that nice suit."

Harry went red as Tonks chuckled, as the two of them reached the elevators without a second glance, other than a few warm smiles from some sharply-dressed businessmen leaving the building early for lunch. Better yet, there was nobody waiting for the elevators, so they easily managed to commandeer an elevator car for themselves.

The second the metallic doors closed, Harry let out a breath. "That was close..."

"Would you relax?" Tonks replied quickly, eyeing the elevator buttons keenly. "Okay, so we need a four and a fifteen... and a thirteen... and a six... and then the bell."

She rapidly jabbed all of the buttons and hit the alarm buzzer with the palm of her hand. But instead of a screeching alarm, a pleasant female voice filled the elevator.

"Welcome to the Department of Magical Finance. Visitors, please sign in at the desk. Have a pleasant day."

Tonks smiled as the elevator began slowly moving. "See, no trouble at all."

"We're making the assumption that Fleur got our message and won't be in the office today," Harry said nervously, drumming his fingers against the elevator wall. "We never did hear back from her."

"True enough, but it's not like she told either of us where she lived," Tonks replied briskly, carefully tying her hair back before drawing her wand. "Okay, I need to cast this charm before we get to the top."

"You sure it'll work?"

"It should," Tonks muttered tensely, pointing the wand at her face. "Pulchellus visio!"

There was a flash of pink light and perfumed smoke, but when the smoke had dissipated, Harry smiled. Though he wasn't inside his own body, there was now a certain otherworldliness surrounding Tonks' features that nearly matched Fleur's perfectly. "I think it worked, Tonks."

"You sure?" Tonks asked concernedly, eyeing herself in the mirrored elevator. "Not sure I can tell..."

"Department of Magical Finance main floor," the pleasant voice said, as the elevator dipped slightly to the proper floor. "Have a pleasant day."

The elevator doors opened up to a flurry of activity. The foyer, done in white marble and dark woods, had a peculiar opulence that almost felt like the rooms in Gringotts Harry had seen, but the light was much brighter and whiter, giving the room a very clean and new, almost antiseptic feel. An attractive young woman, wearing Muggle business attire, was sitting behind the front desk, and behind her was the door that Harry guessed led to the cubicles of the Department proper.

"Good morning, Miss Delacour," the woman began politely – although Harry caught the flash of pure envy on her face. "Good to see you back from your leave. How was the vacation?"

If Tonks was surprised by this comment, she didn't show it, only giving a warm smile and mimicking Fleur's accent. "It was quite passable, thank you. Did I get any messages?"

"Everything's at your desk," the woman replied, her eyes darting to Harry. "Who's your friend? We'll need her to sign in."

Harry forced a smile onto his simulacrum's face. "Clarissa Desdame, of Desdame & Vuneren, attorney at Magical Law, here to pick up some paperwork for my case."

The woman at the desk nodded. "Understood, ma'am – if I could just get you to sign the guest book, that would be great."

Harry walked stiffly to the book and bent to sign it. Just need to keep control... shit, nearly signed my name 'Harry' here! Just stroke out the first few letters...

"Sorry," Harry said aloud, giving the young woman an apologetic, slightly embarrassed smile, "my mind's on the case, wandering a bit."

"Oh, it's fine," the woman said brightly, returning the smile. "If you wouldn't mind passing the book to those two visitors, that'd just be fine."

Finishing his signature, Harry carefully set the quill flat on the book and turned...

Only to come face-to-face with the scarred visage of Dmitri Kemester – whose eyes lit up with sudden recognition...

The sudden knock on the heavy wooden door would have caught most men off-guard – but Alastor Moody was not most men.

He didn't raise his head from the heap of scribbled notes – which was starting to resemble a small Muggle paperback, allowing his eye to swivel to the door. Granger... interesting. She doesn't look like she's slept, but that means nothing in Hogwarts these days... and from the looks of things, she's running on pure adrenaline more than anything...

He cleared his throat. "What?"

Hermione cracked the stone door open and carefully looked in the office. "Professor, can I have a moment?"

"Depends," Moody replied curtly, still not looking up at her – though his magical eye was fixed on her every nervous motion. "What do you want?"

"Well, I was doing some research in the library about the attacks," Hermione began hastily, unslinging her book bag and rifling through it frantically to pull a thick, slightly crumpled wad of parchment. "Oh shoot, they're –"

"Cut to the point, Granger," Moody growled, taking the notes from Hermione's hand and quickly spreading them one of the few spots on his desk not covered in papers.

"I was trying to track down a pattern for the attacks, running on my theory that each stage represents an age period of human life," Hermione said quickly, running a hand through her tangled hair distractedly as she moved closer to the desk. "And from that, I was going through old Daily Prophets going back a few centuries to find out if other people have died at Hogwarts before. That sort of thing

might not have been mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*, but it probably would have made the news."

Moody grunted. It wasn't a bad idea, of course – he'd done it two weeks earlier. "What did you find, Granger?"

Hermione swallowed hard. "Not a lot, really. I found a few possibilities, but nothing substantial, and the Hogwarts library only carries Prophets back to about 1793 –"

"So you have nothing?" Moody growled, forcibly keeping the disappointment and bitterness out of his voice.

"Not exactly!" Hermione said frantically, pointing down at her notes. "So, from there I started looking up the memoirs of old professors and Headmasters –"

"Granger, I'm going to stop you right there," Moody said curtly, "because you've wasted your time. I've already gone through the Hogwarts library and every volume the Headmaster was able to provide for me in intricate detail – no easy task, considering the language and magical protections of the earlier books, so what do you think you've found –"

Hermione ducked down and pulled a massive book from her bag that Moody recognized instantly, and he wrinkled his nose with disgust. The book was bound with black gaudy leather and a tattered silver ribbon poked out of the spine for use as a bookmark.

"This," Hermione said, breathing fast, "is the personal memoirs of Phineas Nigellus Black, least popular Headmaster at Hogwarts."

"I know," Moody said with distaste, taking the book with the same air one would hold a rotting rabbit carcass. "I've already read through it – it wasn't very good, and certainly not insightful."

"Except for this," Hermione said quickly, flipping the book open to the ribbon-marked page and pointing down to the bottom. "It's an excerpt from Phineas' speech when he took Headmaster's office."

Moody scowled, but he read:

"...and I cannot thank my great family enough for providing their necessary support to me. The Black line has always upheld the highest degree of integrity and generosity, and I will uphold their legacy at Hogwarts to the end of my days, and enshrine the family name in the castle for future generations who prove worthy..."

There was silence for a long few seconds, and then –

"Well?" Hermione asked urgently. "Don't you see it?"

Moody snorted before closing the book. "Yeah, I see it. Pompous gasbag."

"He said he wanted to 'enshrine the family name in the castle for future generations who prove worthy!'" Hermione exclaimed, jabbing down at the book. "Considering the man made no real lasting impact on the school, couldn't it mean that he wanted to be buried here?"

Moody's raised both his eyebrows. "That's a big leap, Granger, to pull from this little scrap of text –"

"It's all we –"

"Which, if you knew the history of Phineas Nigellus Black," Moody snapped, glaring at Hermione, "you'd know comes from a speech he never gave."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "What? B-But, the book, it has –"

"Use your bloody brain, Granger!" Moody snarled, shoving the book off the desk onto the floor. "Black was a liar from beginning to end, and not a very good one at that. If you knew the true history of the man, you would have known he spent most of his acceptance speech yammering like an imbecile!" He stood up and turned to his wall of papers as his scowl grew deeper, his magical eye still fixed on a trembling Hermione. "After all, Black ego tends to outstrip Black intelligence."

Hermione took a few seconds to compose herself before taking a deep breath. "Okay... but does it matter that he didn't say it in real life? He could have still meant to say it, and he could have done something even without documenting it."

"That's an even bigger leap of logic, Granger," Moody growled.

"Professor, we don't have anything else to lose," Hermione pleaded. "Look, say he did try to build a tomb at Hogwarts. He would have built it deep in the dungeons, it would have been easy to hide, and 'the worthy' – Slytherins, in his eyes – would have had the best chances to find it." Her eyes suddenly began shining with ideas. "What if the labourers building the tomb found something by accident, a passage down into the depths of Hogwarts..."

"Stop."

Hermione stopped talking as Moody slowly turned to face her, his expression stony.

"How long has it been since you've slept, Granger?"

She didn't expect that question, and she shifted awkwardly. "I... I dunno, Professor. Nobody really gets a lot of sleep at Hogwarts anymore... ever since the beginning of the term..."

"Get some sleep – now," Moody ordered sternly. "Get up to Gryffindor Tower and stay there, and for Merlin's sake keep your mouth shut."

"Does that mean... does that mean you believe me?" Hermione asked hesitantly. "You think it's possible?"

Moody snorted as he reached for a bag on his mantelpiece and tossed some of the Floo powder in the smouldering grate. "I won't be able to rule it out until I check."

As soon as Hermione had pulled her notes and books back into her bag and hurried out, Moody turned to the fireplace.

"Minerva! Dumbledore's office – we may have a lead."

"Blaise, stop doing that," Malfoy said curtly, looking up from his essay.

Zabini scowled, but stopped drumming his fingers on his already completed paper and crossed his arms. "Why, was I disturbing you?"

"Yes," Malfoy snapped, struggling to regain his fragile focus. Ever since Nott had disappeared (according to Blaise, he had gone down there), Malfoy's nerves had been on edge. Nott's dangerous enough with his mind half-gone... if he exposes himself, there'll be hell to pay... but if he's around, he could find out about my father's plan if I let something slip... blast!

His quill tip split beneath his fingers. With a muttered curse, he abruptly rolled up his essay and tossed it into his bag with a scowl.

"Drama queen."

"Fuck off, Blaise."

"I don't know why you're so concerned Nott will expose us," Zabini said idly, reaching into his bag and carefully extracting a Daily Prophet. "You're the one who's acting suspicious as all hell."

"Wasn't that the plan?" Malfoy growled.

Zabini shrugged. "Does it really matter now? Things have escalated as much as they have, and the poor souls don't have a damn clue where to look. I say nonchalance is the way to go." He leaned back in his chair and turned the page. "At least it'll be my plan."

"Well, your family isn't in disgrace at the moment," Malfoy spat. "At least whatever's left of it."

Zabini's eyes narrowed dangerously at the low blow, but to Malfoy's frustration, the other wizard refused to respond to the goading. Icy cold bastard...

"Oh for Merlin's sake, now you're sulking," Zabini said drily, not looking up from his paper. "I stand by my comment – you are a drama queen."

"How are you so damn sure that Nott won't –"

"I trust he'd be less likely to expose us with his mind gone than with you lucid as you are," Zabini said coolly.

"Maybe I should just leave then."

"Maybe," Zabini replied, still not looking up, completely ignoring Malfoy's intent gaze.

"Blaise."

He finally looked up and glared. "What?"

"Maybe," Malfoy repeated slowly, "I should just leave then."

Zabini's eyes widened for an instant before snorting and turning back to his newspaper. "Coward."

"Better one alive than dead or worse – without station," Malfoy said in a low voice, leaning forward. "You have nothing left either, Blaise, and my father has a plan-"

"Your father always has a plan, and the last plan he had got your family where they are in the first place," Zabini said flatly. "Maybe you should consider that."

"Regardless, Malfoys stick together," Malfoy said fiercely.

Zabini stopped reading, and carefully folded his newspaper, setting it down on the table between them. And then he leaned close.

"Take a lesson from my family, Draco: family is not sacred. Just because you were born from them does not mean you should let their rash words destroy you." Zabini scowled. "They're just like us – human. Refusing to acknowledge that doesn't make you bold, it makes you prodigiously stupid."

"So I take your answer," Malfoy began furiously, blood rushing to his face, "is a –"

"We'll see," Zabini replied with a shrug, kicking his chair back a few inches so he could put his feet on the table, conveniently right in front of Malfoy's face. "We'll see what –"

BANG.

Malfoy recoiled back away from the table as Zabini turned towards the door of the nearly-deserted common room – everyone had slipped off to dinner. Or so they had thought.

The figure leaning against the wall was recognizable – although Malfoy could hardly restrain his desire to pull away as he approached the table, his move half a stagger, half a lazy prow. His eyes were listless, rolling in dark sockets, and he stank of sweat and foulness.

Zabini's eyes narrowed. "Draco, I may stand corrected." He slowly rose to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, Theodore?"

Theodore's Nott's wasted lips curled into an insane grin. "You... you really needed to be there... to be there... it starts blue, and stops, and then it goes until the sun shines..."

"He's raving... Blaise, what are you doing?"

Zabini, who had just finished rolling up his sleeves, gave Malfoy a short gesture. "Get up, I'm going to need your help in a second."

"But what are you..."

"The colours were spinning, they were everywhere –"

He didn't get another word out, because his jaw had been rammed shut by Zabini's fist. Nott staggered back, his eyes glazing, but Zabini wasn't done. Grabbing the insane Slytherin by the scruff of the neck, he began dragging him towards the dormitories.

"Would you actually help instead of just stare?" Zabini snarled, glaring at Malfoy and kicking Nott in the ribs as he began to struggle.

I'm going to regret this, Malfoy thought bitterly, but taking Nott's feet, he helped Zabini carry him into the bathroom towards the showers, where they unceremoniously dumped him on the floor.

"You know," Malfoy mused as he stepped away from the showers, "this is the sort of thing we should have kept Vincent and Gregory around for –"

"Oh, quit bitching and turn up the damn water!" Zabini snapped, drawing his wand and launching several jets of sparks at the faucets.

It didn't take long for the water to turn on. A few seconds later, Zabini's careful jets of sparks showed their true purpose, and Nott began howling as steam billowed out of the stall.

"He's going to kill us," Malfoy said, carefully stepping towards the door.

But he was too late – out of the mist came Theodore Nott, soaked to the skin and mad as hell.

"What... the FUCK-"

"Oh, who would have thought that scalding hot water restores your logical faculties," Zabini cut him off curtly, flicking his wand and sending a few jets of sparks to turn off the faucets.

"What did you –"

"You were starting to smell," Zabini said coldly, tossing Nott a towel. "I didn't want your stench to blow our cover."

Neither of them expected what came next. Nott's eyes, for an instant, cleared of any mad light, instead burning with horrifying realization. And then –

"She knows."

"I didn't catch that, what?" Malfoy demanded.

"She knows, she knows, she knows, she knows, she knows, she knows, SHE KNOWS!" Nott's final words were a bellow that even caused Zabini to step back a step, and Malfoy couldn't blame him – the madness had fully returned to Nott's face.

"Wait, who knows what?" Zabini snarled, putting away his wand. "Who's 'she'?"

"Mudblood," Nott whispered, dragging the word through his teeth.

"Yeah, and there are a lot of those," Zabini retorted. "A name, if you would."

"It's Granger, isn't it?" Malfoy said suddenly, his eyes flashing.

"How would you –"

"Mudblood," Nott hissed, giving a single slow nod.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'."

Zabini rounded on Malfoy and jerked his thumb at Nott. "You know he's incoherent, we can't put weight behind a single thing he says, and besides, I thought we silenced the bitch –"

"She used to run around with Potter!" Malfoy spat, slamming his fist into his palm. "Fuck, we should have known scare tactics wouldn't have taken her down for long –"

"But it wasn't like we had much of an option to do anything about here!" Zabini argued. "I mean, from what we were told of the rules of this..."

"Then maybe we can use the one possessed now –"

"Can't compel, can't compel... can't compel once he's already inside..."

Malfoy growled with frustration as he glared at Nott, who was now muttering fiercely to himself as he stared with insane intensity into the mirror. "And if that insane rambling meant anything, we can't compel the spirit to do shit, so we're stuck..."

His voice trailed off at the slow smile spreading on Zabini's face. "Blaise, I know that smile, what are you thinking?"

Zabini looked over at Nott. "That we contact the Dark Lord... and then we get creative."

"Strange," Kemester began slowly, fighting to keep any expression off his face, "that you and I keep running into each other." His eyes narrowed as he extended his hand. "And yet we've never made any introductions. Dmitri Kemester, Hit Wizard – and you are?"

Potter's lawyer hesitated, her eyes filled with sudden shock for a few minutes before she took Kemester's hand and shook it briefly, with the firm, fast handshake of a professional. "Clarissa Desdame, attorney-at-law."

Rita's eyes lit up. "I know that name – you're Harry Potter's lawyer! My, I could imagine you would have –"

"Absolutely nothing to say to you, Miss Skeeter," Desdame retorted swiftly, with supreme disdain, not even deigning to look at the indignant reporter. "So what brings you here, Hit Wizard... ah, Kemester, you said it was?"

"You know my name," Kemester said in a low, dangerous voice, "so don't play games here, Miss Desdame." He raised his voice a bit louder. "And actually, I'm here to speak with Miss Delacour here, regarding the missing persons report that was filed regarding her – or rather, the lack thereof."

Delacour frowned. "Missing persons report?"

"You've been missing for a few months, Delacour," Kemester said lightly, pulling the file from his blazer jacket, "so I can only assume you wouldn't mind catching up with me, just so I can make sure this report is filed properly?"

"She's been on vacation," the receptionist helpfully chirped up.

"Has she?" Kemester asked, his voice filled with sudden, intense interest as he sidestepped Desdame and approached the counter. "And who told you that?"

"Mr. O'Sanden did, of course," the receptionist replied cheerfully.

"Spectacular," Kemester murmured, his mind racing turning to the three women glaring at each other. "Miss Delacour, if you wouldn't mind, can we continue this at your desk? I don't want to keep you away from your work, of course."

"You have to sign in here," the receptionist said loudly, tapping her wand on the sign-in book.

Kemester considered for a second wiping the receptionist's memory where she sat and taking Rita, Desdame, and Delacour down to the Ministry proper for interrogation, but he restrained himself and quickly scrawled a signature in the book, blatantly taking up a few extra lines. Rita gave Kemester an incredulous look, but she quickly added her signature beneath his.

"Oh, and Fleur?" the receptionist added suddenly.

"Que?" Delacour snapped. She seemed startled at the harshness of her reply, and carefully lowered her voice and smiled. "Sorry about that, oui?"

"I just remembered to tell you, O'Sanden had your desk and papers moved over on the far left side, by the new windows," the receptionist replied, a little thrown off by Delacour's sharpness. "Hope you find everything okay."

"Ah, understood. Merci."

They passed through the doors behind the receptionist to a flurry of activity. Despite the hardwood floors and paneled cubicles, there was still a buzz of activity from the numerous Floo connections scattered around the room, and hundreds of purple paper airplane memos zooming through the air. Delacour led, but Kemester immediately noticed that she was moving a bit haltingly – as was Desdame.

"You two lost?"

Desdame stiffened, but Delacour simply huffed and pointed at a far, unoccupied desk by the windows. "My desk is right over there. You may conjure yourself chairs if you wish."

Kemester gave a small grin as he drew his wand and conjured three stiff metal chairs out of thin air and set them on the ground. "Well, take a seat then, ladies. After all, I wouldn't want to take up too much of your time, now would I?"

He signed his name carefully at the bottom of the page and smiled at the receptionist. "Hope that's fine."

The receptionist returned his warm smile. "Hope you find what you're looking for, sir. Mr. O'Sanden's office is near the back. Do you have an appointment?"

He shrugged, and waved his wand. Instantly, her eyes went glassy, and he carefully stepped around her. "You know," he remarked, almost to himself, "I really don't feel like answering that question."

He didn't wait for the receptionist's response that would never come as he stepped inside the Department of Magical Finance and began walking to the back, his mind racing. It wouldn't take long to get this issue sorted out, the money going to the right people, and fortunately O'Sanden had always been pliable.

And then he saw the flash of white-blond.

At first, he thought it was a trick of the light, but he looked again – and there it was.

He felt as though he had been punched in the stomach. No... how... it can't be... how can she...

But it was unmistakeable. She was sitting opposite Rita Skeeter – Rita Skeeter! – an ugly-looking Hit Wizard he didn't recognize, and –

If there had been any air left in his lungs at that point, it would have been gone. His mind went blank, his rational thought evaporating like a puddle in a furnace.

She's there... and they're together... and Skeeter's there...

He nearly drew his wand and cursed them all right there, incinerating them to ash. He'd take the office down too, just to be sure...

This can't be happening. It's too soon... it's too soon...

But then rational thought returned, and he took a deep breath. Trust, but verify – even what I see. Any one of them – or more – could be imposters, and they aren't why I'm here. I can verify the truth later, make this all make sense...

He nearly chuckled to himself at that thought as he resumed his course. Sense... it hadn't made much sense for years, and it wasn't going to start now.

"So," Kemester began, fixing Tonks with a steely eye, "you don't have much of a tan – where did you go on holidays?"

Tonks gave Harry a quick look, ignoring Skeeter entirely as the reporter pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill and a pad of paper, and then replied just haughtily enough to imply that Kemester was an ass for even asking the question.

"I went home, to France."

"Not according to our files, you didn't," Kemester shot back, a smirk creeping onto his face. "No record of you leaving the country. Try again."

"I received special clearance from the Department of International Magical Co-Operation, as a Ministry employee, to return home for a time to clear my head," Tonks said steadily, her faked French accent still managing to hold up. "After the... problem at the Ministry."

"Who paid for your trip?"

"The Ministry, obviously," Tonks replied, trying desperately to keep the uncertain edge from her voice.

Skeeter scoffed. "The Ministry wouldn't have paid –"

"With as many workers as were injured and killed in that disaster, if the Ministry wanted to have any employees by the end of the day, they would have had to pay," Harry interrupted smoothly.

Neither Kemester nor Skeeter looked convinced.

"And how would the Ministry get that money, with the goblin hostilities?" Kemester asked slowly, dragging his finger in a pattern along the desk.

"Workers' compensation funds," Harry replied stiffly. "Required by law to have them."

"And why would Miss Delacour be at the main offices at all?" Kemester continued, raising his uneven eyebrows. "She works here, far from the calamity there. Why would she have received any compensation?"

"I was... I was at the main offices on the day of the attack," Tonks replied, and despite himself, Harry could feel a thin trickle of sweat on the small of his back.

"Why?" Kemester pursued. Tonks quickly glanced at Harry... and he suddenly remembered the last time he had seen Fleur, and why she had left the Ministry...

"She was answering allegations Scrimgeour had brought against her," Harry said quickly. "The Head of the Auror Office had been poking around here, inquiring into her actions, and she felt it necessary to answer his queries in person."

Kemester hadn't expected that, and Skeeter's nostrils flared with irritation, but when Kester glanced away for a few seconds, Tonks slipped Harry a grateful smile.

"I'll be speaking with Scrimgeour to confirm that," Kester said after a few seconds.

"Of course you will," Harry replied, giving the Hit Wizard a sweet smile he knew would frustrate him to no end.

"So, where in France did you go?" Kester asked, changing tactics.

"Bordeaux," Tonks answered promptly. "To stay with my family – my uncle has a vineyard there."

"Really," Kester said dryly, his disbelief plain. "And I assume you enjoyed your time there? I suspect it was beautiful there."

"Oui."

"A lot of time outside?"

Tonks shrugged. "A bit."

"You didn't tan or burn at all," Kester said, the grin creeping back onto his face. "Must not have spent that much time outside. I mean, what's the point of going to the south of France if you're not going to spend time outside –"

"My family," Tonks replied quickly, trying to keep her expression as blank as possible. "I mean, it was Yule –"

"I know the date," Kester cut her off sharply. "So, buy gifts for your family?"

"Oui."

"Where did you shop?"

Tonks paused, and Harry frowned – he wasn't sure where Kemester was going. "Around."

"Do any shopping here, or just in France?"

"Some here," Tonks replied with a frown.

Suddenly, Harry got an idea where things were going. Uh oh.

"If you bought gifts for your family, I suspect you got receipts for those gifts," Kemester said slowly. "And I suspect you would have had to pay some taxes at the border – I mean, our Department of International Magical Co-Operation is good, but not that good."

He gave a predatory smile, like the cat that had finally caught his prey. "So, can you show me the receipts?"

Tonks huffed. "You honestly would have expected me –"

"As a member of the Department of Magical Finance, I would have assumed it," Kemester interrupted, his eyes narrowing.

"Nobody's perfect, Mr. Kemester," Harry interrupted sharply.

There were a long few seconds, only interrupted by the ambient noise around them and the scratching of Rita Skeeter's quill whizzing across the parchment.

"You know, O'Sanden is the interim head of International Magical Co-Operation," Kemester finally remarked, his smirk widening. "I could just have Miss Skeeter skitter on over to his office, and I can get some real answers here."

Harry could hardly hold back a grin of his own at the suddenly nervous expression on Rita Skeeter's face, but Tonks only crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm sure it doesn't need to come to that," Harry interjected crisply.

"And why do you keep interfering in investigations that I've involved in?" Kemester asked, suddenly turning to Harry and glaring at him with irritation. "It's getting rather annoying."

"And unless you're accusing Miss Delacour of a crime, she does not need to answer any further questions," Harry replied curtly, her irritated expression matching Kemester's. "It is not your concern where she was on holidays or what she was doing."

Kemester nearly opened his mouth to say a harsh retort, but with a warning glance from Skeeter, he pursed his lips and turned back to Tonks. "I apologize, Miss Delacour. It's good to have you... well, back among us."

"From what I've heard about you, Mousieur Kemester," Tonks replied evenly, "I think I can say the same thing."

Kemester's laugh was barking, and too loud. "That's fair. Incidentally, Miss Desdame, is it too much for me to ask why you're here?"

"I'm collecting material for my client's case," Harry replied tersely, "and Miss Delacour is aiding me in procuring that information."

"You have a subpoena to get that information —"

"It isn't required if the records are declassified and public," Tonks interrupted smoothly. "I'm just helping Madame Desdame get the correct information."

"Well, we wouldn't want our legal partnerships," Kemester replied softly, rising to his feet, "even the, ah, translucent ones, to become informed, now, would we?"

Harry's breath nearly caught in his chest, but he gave Kemester a curt nod. "No, Hit Wizard, we would not."

Kemester glared at the two of them for a long few seconds before turning to stalk away, heading towards the entrance, Skeeter close behind.

The second they were out of eyeshot, Harry leaned close. "You did a good job –"

"Not good enough," Tonks whispered. "They suspect something's up. We need to get the papers and get out before I lose my breakfast."

"But you don't think they've got enough for leads, do you?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Harry, with Hit Wizards like Kemester, you should know by now that leads don't matter," Tonks replied tiredly, rising to her feet unsteadily. "He just digs and digs until he hits something."

"You gave up far too easy," Rita spat, her voice rising to an accusatory tone as she stormed out of the Department behind Kemester. "You should have hammered –"

"Skeeter, do the world a favour and shut up," Kemester snapped, turning to the receptionist. "You – how long do you reckon Delacour was on vacation?"

The receptionist blinked a few times, but Kemester could tell from the glazed look on her face that he wasn't going to get anywhere. "You know what, forget it."

He looked down – and paused. His eyes fell on the sign-in book and...

"Oh, that is interesting..."

"What?" Rita said, clamouring behind him to get a closer look. "What's –"

"Nothing that would concern you for the moment," Kemester replied shortly, snapping the book shut and moving towards the elevator. "Skeeter, you touch that book and I'll take your fingers off, let's go!"

"I don't have to take orders," Rita sneered as she stepped into the elevator as the doors closed behind her. "Especially not from –"

She didn't say another word, because Kemester had just placed his wand an inch from her nose.

"You want to get answers?" the Hit Wizard began in a quiet, dangerous voice.

"Yes, but –"

"Then I need your eyes. I need you to keep an eye on Desdame and Delacour when they leave this building. Follow them, get any information you can."

"And what makes you think –"

"That you can get any more than I can?" Kemester finished with a smirk that only highlighted the horrific scars on his face. "Simple – you're paparazzi. You specialize in this shit, and knowing you, you've got tactics and methods I don't. So use them."

"And in return?" Rita's voice was surprisingly even, almost business-like – it was clear she had been intimidated before, and knew what to do.

"Larshall and I will be tracking our other leads." Kemester replied curtly. "Finding out who killed Laertes Rawling, finding the leak in the Department, and getting Desdame & Vuneren for the legal fraud it is."

"And how are you going to do that?"

Kemester smirked. "I read my partner's reports, the ones he made when I was in Azkaban – and according to that, Desdame had another client – and I think I should pay him a visit."

So it has come to this.

They should know enough by enough – enough of the truth, enough of the fragments that I left behind. Enough of the details deemed insignificant to give just enough of a trail. A tawdry quest, of which the task is pitiful and the rewards are paltry...

After all, isn't that what the truth is anyways? Nobody wants to hear it, for it lacks a certain... grandeur, a moral for the ages, to be told to generations to come. Nobody wants to know the details, because that's where the devil is.

My bargaining days with devils have come to a close.

They will call me a coward. They will call me a traitor. They will curse my name and spit its taste from their mouths. And in the darkest, coldest hours of their lives, when the dampness fills their lungs and their eyes are streaked with tears, they will wish they had taken my path. They will never admit it, not even to themselves when the dawn comes, but they will wish it.

The smallest catharsis I can take, because I will never know.

Perhaps I am too bitter, spent too much time alone in the bleak cold night. It is a night I could have avoided, had I not tethered all my dreams to a bird in the window.

The string snapped, the bird died, and I did not leave the house.

No historian will pay credit to the grand failure that is my life, the years of wasted time, huddled in corners and standing by gravestones in the rain. Most men come in out of the rain, light a candle, and live.

No, like everything that came before it, and everything that will likely come after, there's no grand finale to this story, no great triumph of the light or dark. There is no gain. It ends on a sour note, a bitter failure, a damning indictment of all humanity has to offer – nothing more than the sum of its parts.

Calling it less than nothing would be paying tribute.

He paused, and set down his pen, rereading the lines neatly written across the page.

Even for him, they seemed like melodramatic poetry, utterly worthless, a complete waste of time.

And yet a second later a bitter smile passed his face – he had spent his life wasting time, why not go out in mangled, hackneyed style?

He picked up his pen and continued to write.

The apologies have been made, the dues have been paid, the punishments have been meted, the rewards have been given. I don't even have to say a word – everything has been prepared, my job is done.

He paused, as the tinny noise he knew only he could hear broke through the silence. The alarm had been tripped, the siren triggered – they were coming.

He raised his fingers and snapped them once, triggering the enchantments. Then he set his pen to paper one last time.

Perhaps I have been more of a showman than even I have realized. No matter. It is curtain call – there will be no encore.

You went hunting for Severus Snape, Harry Potter, and now you have found him. Reap the fruits of your labour – and find that they're rotten to the core.

The rain was biting and the wind was frigid, and Harry pulled his cloak tighter around his simulacrum as he drew his wand, squinting as he looked down the trash-filled street before ducking back under the awning.

"You're saying that Snape lives around here?" he began incredulously, looking back down the cramped street.

"I'm saying that we're close enough for Sirius to set up a perimeter before we close in," Tonks replied, shoving the door open as they ducked into the abandoned warehouse building. Lighting her wand with a muttered word, she surveyed the mostly empty room. Aside from the trash heaps and the strong stench of rot that filled the place, it would suffice.

Harry pulled back his hood and shook out his simulacrum's long brown hair, and Tonks couldn't help but shudder a bit. She had suggested that it might not be a good idea for Harry to use that particular simulacrum, but Harry had been adamant – if they were looking to take down Snape, they needed all the firepower they could get.

"You okay, Tonks?"

"I'm fine," she said hastily, her hair going a sodden turquoise as she shivered. "It's bloody frigid out there – hopefully the rain will let up a bit before we make our move."

"I don't envy Sirius," Harry said, letting out a short breath as he shook out his cloak.

"Hey, he was the one that volunteered for this," Tonks said with a snort. "Not our fault he didn't check the weather before coming up here to Manchester."

"I still can't believe Snape actually lives around here," Harry murmured as he approached a grease-slicked window and peeked outside. Most of the streetlights were burnt out around the dark brick buildings, half of which were derelict. "You'd think he'd be closer to London, with Diagon Alley and all, instead of up here. I mean, my uncle had a factory over in Liverpool for his damn drills – that's who I think of when I think of this place, not Snape."

Tonks actually grinned. "Maybe I should go pay him a visit, tell him not to treat his nephew so badly over the summer."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, maybe. Not sure I'm going back to that place – I won't, if I have my way – but it'd be worth the sight of Uncle

Vernon's face when he sees me with you." He winked at her. "Not sure he'd approve of you."

Tonks let a mock-offended expression flit onto her face. "Why on earth would he think that? I'm delightful. Plus, I tend to do very well with parents, thank you very much."

"You haven't met my uncle," Harry muttered, fiddling with the straps of his mother's old plating. With Sirius' help, he had worked to get the few scratches out of it. "You know, I think Sirius was a bit disappointed we didn't run into any problems yesterday with the infiltration."

"Still think it was too easy," Tonks said, glancing at the doors as she pulled her cloak tighter around herself – the heating system in the building was long gone. "Even with Kemester and Skeeter, I still think it was too easy."

Harry paused, his fingers falling from the ties of his armour. He turned to look at her, but Tonks didn't meet his eyes. She instead bent and began tugging at her boots.

"Something's not right."

Tonks' head immediately snapped up. "You think we're being watched?" She kept her voice very even, as if she were discussing the weather or something just as banal.

"No... it's just a feeling I've got." Harry gave a quick wave of his wand and muttered a word and a second later, a strong warm gust of air washed over both of them. "You know, after everything... this just seems too straightforward."

"Maybe that was Snape's point," Tonks said with a shrug. "Make it straightforward and then we'll get screwed up looking for the complications."

"It's not just that."

Tonks paused, her mind racing. Has he... has he finally noticed... "What are you talking about?"

Harry paused, scratched his temple, and then shook his head. "Maybe I'm just imagining things... it's probably just this simulacrum, everything feels different when I'm using it."

Tonks tensed, and she physically stopped her hair from involuntarily darkening. "Like what, exactly?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "If I knew, I'd tell you, but... but it's weird, everything seems tarnished when I'm using this body, like it's slowly rusting away... hell, that probably doesn't make any sense at all."

Tonks felt her gut clench. This was new – this was different. It wasn't like things were with her – how her appearance had kept shifting since the second simulacrum ritual. How her hair kept going black, and her eyes green.

How she couldn't sleep for longer than a few hours before she'd wake up in a cold sweat, her dreams filled with twisted coils and fluttering curtains. Except when I was with Harry, she thought with a shiver. I slept then...but that's just not right, something's twisted here...

"Maybe it's a side effect of the magic, I dunno..."

Harry had still been talking, and Tonks wrenched her mind back into the conversation. "Well, how about the next time we talk to Cassane, we can ask him – he knows this sort of magic better than all of us –"

The rap on the door nearly caught them both off-guard, but before Harry could say a word, a black shaggy dog trundled into the room, shaking off a sheen of rainwater all over the floor.

Both Harry and Tonks tensed, but a second later, the dog shivered and transformed, revealing an exasperated Sirius Black, who remained completely drenched.

"I'm never volunteering for anything again," he said firmly, running his hands through his hair and shaking them out thoroughly. "I've been

all around the damn block in this freezing rain – you have any idea how bloody cold it is in the middle of January?"

"Well, you should get dried off –" Tonks paused as Harry cast the spell again, this time sending a burst of wind that nearly knocked Sirius' wand clean out of his hand. "A little much there, Harry."

"Damn simulacrum, sorry," Harry said apologetically, tossing Sirius a towel from one of the bags deposited on the floor. "So, anything special?"

"Found where Snape's living and did a circuit around it," Sirius said briskly as he ran the towel over his face and hands. "Ugly little place too, completely matches his personality. Couple very standard enchantments, nothing that special that I could discern, but with Snivellus, I have no idea what to expect. The bastard probably rimmed his house in spells that turn intestines to cucumbers or pubic hair to porcupine quills for all we know."

Harry involuntarily looked down, while Tonks just sighed and concentrated for a few seconds. There... should have shaved before I came anyways...

"So, same plan as we talked about?" Harry asked briskly, giving his wand an experimental twirl. "Hard, fast, Tonks and I through the front, Sirius through the back?"

"Except we have the same problem as we did in London with Muggles," Sirius replied, now taking the towel to his leather jacket and wiping it furiously. "Less so, because of this bloody rain and we'll be harder to see, but we can't go shouting curses, and we can't be flashy either. No Exploding Hexes or any of those crazy flame whip spells – we have to minimize collateral damage."

"Hey, it won't be a problem for me," Tonks said, raising her own wand and giving it a quick wave, sending a jet of pink sparks across the room. "Harry's the one with the penchant for blowing things up."

Harry reddened, but he didn't say anything. He knows I'm right, Tonks thought to herself.

"Furthermore, this'll be tricky 'cause we're trying to take Snivellus alive," Sirius continued, grimacing. "And I can guarantee he won't come quietly, or give up everything we might need without a fight." He glanced at Tonks and Harry. "The man's a Death Eater, we can't forget that – and if we want to get to the bottom of whatever's happening at Hogwarts, not to mention get the Potter Vaults back, we might have to be forceful."

"We're not going to torture him," Tonks said immediately, her eyes going hard, the memories of her last conversation with Moody fresh in her mind. "Sirius, don't look at me like that, I know you hate his guts –"

"He tried to have me Kissed, Tonks –"

"We still have standards, Sirius," Tonks said sharply. "We can intimidate him, maybe rough him up a bit –"

"Dibs," Harry and Sirius said at the exact same time, and Tonks restrained the urge to smack both of them across the top of the head.

"We might need him to cooperate," she said with a scowl. "And that means not being stupid. That goes for both of you – double for Sirius."

Sirius waved his hand distractedly, his eyes drifting towards the window. Something seemed a bit off about his expression.

"Sirius, what's wrong?"

Sirius frowned. "I got the strangest feeling, wandering around the block, that I've been here before, but for the life of me, I can't remember when. And something else feels off too... you two feel it?"

Tonks and Harry exchanged glances.

"Yeah," Tonks said quietly, her hair darkening slightly, "we've felt it."

Moody was already waiting impatiently by the ugly gargoyle by the time McGonagall arrived.

"I thought you said you were going to hurry."

"I wasn't about to skip dinner, Alastor," McGonagall said crisply as she approached the gargoyle. "Chocolate Frog!"

The gargoyle quickly hopped aside, and the two professors entered the slowly ascending stairwell.

"I'm assuming you've already triple-checked Miss Granger's theories," McGonagall said, drawing her wand.

"They make as much sense as anything else she's ever said," Moody grunted, shifting his shoulder with a rather loud popping sound. "Meaning she's researched the hell out of it and made a guess. What do you think?"

"Well, it would give us another reason why You-Know-Who sealed off Grimmauld Place," McGonagall replied tightly, her eyes fixed on the approaching doorway to the Headmaster's Office, "to deny us access to Headmaster Black's other portrait, if we had ever deigned to look."

Moody shook his head slowly as he set his hand to the bronze doorknob and shoved. To his mild surprise, the door was unlocked, revealing the glittering majesty of Dumbledore's office, nearly the same as how Dumbledore had left it - with the notable absence of both the Headmaster and his pet phoenix.

"You'd think," Moody grumbled darkly, "that Dumbledore would have locked his office before he vanished."

"Except that he probably wanted to provide us all of the information he could," McGonagall said curtly, stepping around the tables strewn about the room and approaching the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black, least popular Headmaster of Hogwarts. "Headmaster Black!"

The old clever-looking figure stirred slightly before opening a single eye. "You," he began in a low drawl, "are not the Headmaster."

"No, I am not," McGonagall said tersely, "but Hogwarts requires your services, Headmaster, and given that I am Deputy Headmistress –"

"Deputies do not earn all of the privileges of a Headmaster in his absence, Professor," Phineas remarked, pointedly laying emphasis on McGonagall's title. Moody fought back his urge to set the painting on fire. "But I'm bored and I'm sure you'll only be back to bother me again in the future, so what do you want?"

McGonagall exchanged a glance with Moody before returning her gaze to the portrait. "Did you desire burial at Hogwarts?"

Phineas cocked an eyebrow. "That's an... intriguing question. I don't get questions about my past very often."

"Mostly because it's either unimpressive or full of lies," Moody muttered. McGonagall elbowed him in the ribs.

"We would just like a straightforward answer," she continued, carefully weighing her words. "Hogwarts is in danger, and we believe this information may be –"

"I heard Dumbledore's conversations with you before, I know the story," Phineas snapped, smoothing his beard as he sat up a little straighter in his painted seat. "Very well, it was my desire to be buried at Hogwarts."

A small grin crept onto Moody's face. Finally, some answers –

"Of course," Phineas continued bitterly, "if you knew the truth – after a bitter case of magical consumption took my life, my family opted for a far more economical form of burial."

The grin was gone in an instant, replaced by a snarl of disgust as Moody fought back his urge to kick one of the spindly tables strewn around the room with his wooden leg. "Come on, Minerva, this has been a bloody waste of time –"

"Don't behave like that, you misshapen excuse for an Auror!" Phineas retorted loudly. "Do you think I wanted to be buried in a pickling barrel just outside of Holyhead? The town's in bloody Wales, of all places – you'd think the family would at least have the dignity to bury me in England proper –"

"Headmaster, let me ask the question a different way," McGonagall said hastily, cutting into Phineas' rant. "If you were planning to be buried at Hogwarts, where did you want to be buried?"

Phineas sniffed. "Well, inside the castle, of course. My tomb was already constructed –"

"Tomb?" Moody exclaimed, his mismatched eyes widening as he turned back to the painting. "What? Where?"

"How the hell would I know where?" Phineas replied, clearly miffed that he kept getting interrupted. "I can't remember everything here... I do know that it was well-hidden to protect it from miscreants, done all in tasteful white marble, and that it was in the lower levels of Hogwarts, likely towards the dungeons."

The feeling of elation and relief only lasted for a few seconds in Moody's mind before he shoved it back. "Come on, Minerva, we need to move."

"You're welcome," Phineas said sarcastically.

"Yes, thank you," McGonagall said with a nod of respect before hastening after Moody. "And to think nobody's ever found it –"

"Voldemort found it," Moody growled as they left Dumbledore's office. "His little tools found it. And if they can find it, so can we."

"Argus might be able to point us in the right direction," McGonagall continued, carefully closing and locking the door behind her. "Except –"

"Except he's been on the indefinite leave of absence Dumbledore gave him after the attack," Moody growled. "So we're going to have to rely on better sources."

"I hardly believe anyone in this castle knows Hogwarts better than Argus –"

"Damn good thing I already deputized the Weasley twins, then," Moody said with a tight grin.

McGonagall paused on the stairs. "Are you conscripting my students, Alastor. First Miss Granger, and then the twins –"

Moody looked back at her. "They volunteered, Minerva," he replied simply, "and right now, I'm not going to turn down the help."

She pursed her lips. "Don't get them killed, Alastor." Her eyes hardened. "If you do, you'll answer to me."

The ex-Auror met the eyes of the Transfiguration professor, and he nodded.

"Minerva, you have my word."

It wasn't raining or snowing in Hogsmeade, but he wished it almost would, simply for the wet chill air to dissipate. Walking along the darkened streets was like walking through fog – a frozen, chilling fog that seeped through robes and cloaks, chilling right to the bone. And even the pale gleam of the moon, shrouded by clouds, did nothing to alleviate the bleak chill of the night.

It almost reminded Kemester of Azkaban – almost.

He turned to where Reed Larshall was standing ankle-deep in the snow, a thick scarf pulled around this face. "And you're sure that the tip mentioned the Hog's Head?"

"I was just going off what I was given, Dmitri," Larshall replied with a shivering shrug. "We searched the damn place and didn't find him... damn it all, can we get inside?"

"Don't want to be overheard, and I don't trust that place," Kemester muttered, throwing a dark glance at the dirty establishment called the Hog's Head. "The proprietor is the only thing that elevates it above a Knockturn alley pit." He turned to look back at his partner, and noticed with a twinge that his partner was looking awfully pale. "You don't look so good, Reed."

"I'm fine, give me two shots of Firewhiskey and I'll warm right up, can we just go in?" Larshall growled through chattering teeth.

Kemester shook his head with concern as he threw up his hood and approached the bar. Wrinkling his nose at the stench, he shoved the door open.

The clientele was light that night – nobody wanted to be out in the frigid weather – but most of the tables were still occupied, and Kemester and Larshall claimed one of the few unoccupied booths near the fire.

The barman – who Kemester knew was Dumbledore's younger brother Aberforth – looked at the two Hit Wizards and his eyes narrowed for a few seconds, but then he snorted with disgust and set down a few glasses. "What do you two want?"

"Firewhiskey for him, '53 or better," Kemester said coolly, "and I'll have a sniffer of the oldest goblin rye you've got."

"You can't afford that."

Kemester smirked – despite the harsh gruffness of the words, he couldn't help but like the hostile barman. "Fine – '60 then."

"Don't think you can afford that either," Aberforth muttered, but he did not protest, instead stumping back to the bar.

"Did you bring the Rawling file?" Larshall asked in a low voice.

"I did, but I'm not going to bring it out here," Kemester replied, his eyes sweeping the bar with a practiced, professional air. "Too much scum on display..."

"No arguments there," Larshall agreed, pulling off his scarf and holding it near the flames to dry and warm it. "When do you want to talk to Aberforth?"

"Later, when the bar clears out," Kemester replied quietly. "You don't need to stay for that."

"You're going to need backup, Dmitri, he's a Dumbledore –"

"I can take whatever punishment he can throw out," Kemester interrupted curtly. "And besides, you shouldn't be out that late, you're still recovering from injuries."

Larshall snorted a bit. "Says the husk of a man sitting across from me." He set his scarf on the table as he tugged off his gloves. "Nice to know you care."

"You're my partner," Kemester replied simply, honestly. "That means something." And considering all the times I nearly forgot it... yeah, it means something.

Larshall cracked a weak smile and was about to say something, but at that moment, Aberforth arrived with the drinks, setting them on the table with two audible clunks.

"You remember when I used to drink whole bottles of goblin rye?" Kemester murmured, carefully inspecting his drink through the glass.

"Yeah, and you damn near killed yourself every time, no matter how many potions you drank to stave off alcohol poisoning," Larshall added, shaking his head as he downed the first shot of Firewhiskey. "You were a bit of a wreck after the trial went Potter's way back in August."

Kemester grimaced as he took a sip of his rye. "Guess I was a bit."

"You never would have admitted that a few months ago."

"Yeah, well, they say Azkaban changes people," Kemester replied morosely, staring into his drink. "I'm living proof of that."

They drank quietly for a while. The time seemed to blur by as Kemester alternated from watching the bar, gazing out the window, or staring into the fire. He wasn't at peace – not by a long shot – but it was quiet and simple, and he liked that. It's a terrible curse, 'may you live in interesting times'... might make life fascinating, but more often it just makes it hell...

"You know," Larshall said suddenly, "I just thought of something."

"Shoot."

"Why the hell would Sirius Black, infamous criminal, come here?" Larshall gestured around at the bar. A few more hooded figures had arrived, but the bar was still far from full. "The place is run by Dumbledore's brother, and I can only imagine they're sharing information. And all the folks around here... sure, some of them deal in some foul stuff, but most of them would sell him out for a bent Galleon. It just doesn't seem wise to me."

"Black's story makes less and less sense whenever you look at it," Kemester growled. "I don't know where he is, what's he's doing, what side he's playing – or whether or not he's just a fucking psycho. Either way, I'm rapidly reaching the point where I'm going to stop caring about him and think about cases that can actually be solved."

"You're talking about the Rawling file."

"Damn right I am," Kemester said, dropping his voice and leaning close. "Skeeter still hasn't gotten back to me with everything yet, but I did manage to get some declassified papers from the Department of Mysteries regarding what he was working on."

"And?"

Kemester looked around the bar once more and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Apparently, he was trying to utilize some strange 'Veil' in the Department to contact and possibly – possibly – bring back the dead."

Larshall leaned back in his chair. "Get out."

"Nope."

"You're shitting me."

"Wish I was." Kemester drained the rest of his drink and set the glass down on the table. "Apparently he had pretty much no luck whatsoever, but according to the paper that wasn't blacked out, he had a few working theories and a shitload of prototype devices." He shook his head. "Can you imagine... Reed, who'd you bring back?"

Larshall ran a hand over his bristly hair. "Probably my folks for a bit," he finally replied. "Just to talk... set things in order... get everything out that we didn't say before. But only for a bit."

Kemester cocked a misshapen eyebrow. "Only a bit?"

"Death's natural, Dmitri," Larshall replied with a heavy sigh. "Sure they wouldn't want me to pull them away from whatever's after – if there is anything after."

"But if there's nothing, wouldn't they want to be free from, well, the nothingness?" Despite himself, Kemester felt something strange in his voice – it wasn't quite a catch...

Larshall toyed with his empty shot glasses. "Sometimes, I think oblivion's probably preferable."

There was a long silence after those words, in which Aberforth replaced their empty glasses with fresh drinks that neither of them touched.

"Well," Kemester finally began, picking up his glass and uncomfortably turning it over in his fingers, "whatever you can say about death, Rawling's was far from natural. You have any theories?"

The two of them bandied conspiracy theories for another few hours, and the time seemed to slip away. Neither of them drank all that much after the second round – both of them wanted clear heads to pick apart each other's theories. The embers in the fireplace began dimming and the room began to get a little colder, and the few patrons in the Hog's Head began leaving soon afterwards, but the two Hit Wizards stayed, until...

"Closing time, you two."

Kemester looked up and saw Aberforth standing above them, a stern look on his face. A quick glance around the bar revealed it completely deserted.

He turned to Larshall. "Reed, you should get yourself home."

"Are you sure? Dmitri, I don't think –"

"You're still recovering," Kemester interrupted, patting his partner on the shoulder, "and I need a partner that can keep up with my insanity."

Larshall took a steadying breath, but got to his feet. There was a loud pop and as Kemester blinked, his partner disappeared.

"You too," Aberforth grunted, giving Kemester a shove.

Kemester glared at the bartender. "Mind if we have a few words before I leave?"

"Don't see why not."

"What dealings did you have with Sirius Black?"

He was expecting denial, perhaps anger, or maybe even a flood of dark-robed figures coming to the old man's defense, but Aberforth

simply sighed. "He's been around. Here and there – haven't really kept track. Haven't needed to."

"You've been aiding and abetting a criminal –" Kemester began heatedly.

"He's a good man and he's innocent, at least of the charges you threw against him," Aberforth cut him off, his bright blue eyes flashing. "You know, those charges for the trial he never had. A trial that if you had bothered to give him, you would have acquitted him." Aberforth stared at Kemester through his spectacles. "And from what I've heard about you, Mr. Kemester, you don't have a damn right to call anyone a criminal."

"Regardless of my past, Sirius Black has not behaved like an innocent man, Mr. Dumbledore," Kemester said in an even tone. "So if you don't mind, I'd like for you to tell me where he is."

"I don't know... well, not now anyways," Aberforth replied quietly. "I know he stayed for a bit in the chambers above the bar – not like I had much of a choice but to let him stay."

"Did he leave anything behind?" Kemester asked, carefully restraining his eagerness.

The barman shrugged. "Maybe."

Kemester drew his wand and rising to his feet, he began moving towards the stairs – and then he paused.

"Why did you tell me all of that?" he asked slowly, looking back at Aberforth's grim expression. "What's up there? Is this a trap?"

"No trap," Aberforth replied simply, with a bit of a sigh. "If I wanted to trap you, Kemester, I would have drugged your rye, not bothered with this."

"But why implicate yourself?" Kemester pursued, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why do anything of this? Why even say a damn word, or answer my questions at all?"

The barman looked out the window for a few seconds, as if he was considering something, and then fixed Kemester with a steady stare. "It's about two in the morning, Kemester, and I'm tired of this damn charade. Besides, Black's not here, and you can't prove shit I've said one way or the other."

"Unless I find proof upstairs," Kemester said sharply.

Aberforth raised his hands. "Your choice – I'm giving it to you. Search away, boy. Keep in mind you might not like what you find."

With a lingering distrustful look at Aberforth, he quickly climbed the stairs and opened the door. The sitting area was cramped with too many chairs and tables for the room, but Kemester didn't care about that – he saw the closed door at the far side of the room.

He could hear Aberforth slowly climbing the stairs, but he didn't care about that. Finally, he was going to get something. He was going to get answers, solutions, the truth!

He carefully slid around the furniture and approached the door, his wand drawn, ready for anything –

The door came open at this touch –

And his heart nearly stopped inside his chest.

It's not possible... he... he died in Azkaban... no, no, not like this...

"Oh, I'm sorry," Aberforth said bitingly from the top of the stairwell. "Did I say that you might not like what you find? I meant who."

Kemester wanted to strangle Aberforth. He wanted to burn this festering shithole of a bar to the ground. He wanted to run into the night and not stop until he collapsed in the snow.

But he couldn't. He could only stare in shock into the room, at the silently sleeping figure of Claudius Kemester.

His father.

The rain had intensified.

Harry squinted, thankful that his simulacrum did not need glasses, but even still it was hard to see far. Most of the streetlights were broken and sputtering, leaving only haphazard beams of light across the abandoned road. And all around them were the brick houses. Most were identical in design – cheap, the soot on the brick smearing with the rainwater, huddled around the street like beggars.

And they all looked completely empty. Windows were dark, curtains were tattered, and even some doors hung partially open, lazily creaking in the chill night.

Tonks sniffed the air as she slid up next to Harry. "Sirius should be in position soon. After he gives the signal, we move while he throws up the Anti-Apparition Jinx. You ready for this?"

"No."

"Good," Tonks said tersely, sliding her wand free, "'cause I'm not either. Snape could probably take all three of us down if he wanted."

"That's why we have the element of surprise –"

"And not a lot of space," Tonks continued darkly. "It's way too tight, these houses are so small – not a lot of room to do much of anything."

"And we keep running on the assumption Snape doesn't call for backup," Harry said, taking a shuddering breath as he drew his own wand. "If more Death Eaters show up –"

"Then we Disapparate and get the hell out of there," Tonks said grimly. "We're already risking our necks as it is."

Harry took a deep breath, mentally running through the list of spells that he had learned. Most of them he had to discount immediately – it was way too dangerous to throw lightning bolts or fire inside cramped

quarters. It doesn't leave much, and I don't want to risk hitting anyone...

"You know, maybe we're doing this wrong."

Tonks scratched her temple, but she looked intrigued. "You've got an idea."

"Yeah," Harry replied, thinking fast. "We get really close – through whatever shields he throws up – and take him out hand-to-hand. Sirius is one hell of a big dog – he'd probably rip Snape apart."

"Except that Snape tends to carry a silver knife," Tonks replied tightly, "and given he survived the First War, he's probably quite good with it. Still," she mused, "it might be worth a shot..."

Harry took another deep breath as the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach got worse. He wasn't trained in any sort of hand-to-hand combat, and he remembered with a pang how easily Kemester had once manhandled him in the interrogation room. Maybe it's not such a good idea...

He wrinkled his nose as the fresh scent of rot finally hit his nostrils. Most of the air smelt fairly fresh, despite the industrial environment and atmosphere of general neglect, but this was different... it smelt foul, almost chemical...

"Harry, look!"

He snapped his eyes up just in time to see the spray of red sparks light the air – that was the signal.

Time to go.

He ducked out of the shadows and began picking up his pace as he ran along the broken cobblestones. They were slick, and he felt his boots slipping, but he quickened his pace. In the corner of his eye, he could see Tonks sprinting ahead, her wand ripping a wispy trail through the air as it began glowing with a harsh white light...

They rounded the corner and it was like he had tunnel vision. He only noted the filthy sign with the words 'Spinners' End' printed across it for an instant – all he could see was the house at the end of the street, and the solitary light gleaming through dark curtains.

He could see Tonks' silhouette as she charged ahead, the trail of her blazing wand whirling like a blinding cyclone around her. Any second now –

Tonks stopped and wildly pointed her wand at the house at the end of the street.

"Subvertio parietis!"

Harry skidded to a stop as a beam of hot white light as thick as Harry's arm erupted from Tonks' wand. It was blinding – and Harry could see with astonishment that it was shredding through the now-visible protective enchantments like cutting a red onion. What kind of spell –

"Harry, GO!"

He reacted instinctively and ran towards the breaking globes of magic, squinting painfully against the light as it sliced through the last enchantment...

CRACK

Harry felt hot debris on his face as he dove through the shattered door of the house, keeping his wand free and rolling to his feet –

And immediately ducking a second later as a flurry of curses nearly took off his head.

He quickly scanned the room as debris peppered his back. The back wall was covered in leather-bound books, a few stiff armchairs were arranged around the room next to the two solitary lamps, he could see a kitchenette in the back...

But where the hell is Snape –

Without warning, something hot hit his shoulder. To his instant shock, there wasn't much pain – the armour probably weakened the spell – but he still dove for the cover of the armchair –

Which immediately rocketed upwards so quickly it cracked through the ceiling, showering him with masonry and broken chair. So much for cover –

But then Tonks was running in, and a tiny bead of blue light leapt from her wand, instantly illuminating the entire room far better than the lamps and the smoldering fireplace, revealing the dispassionate features of Snape as he slid towards the kitchen –

Harry didn't waste any time. Staying behind as much of the wreckage and dust billowing through the air as he could, he cast two quick Stunning Spells, augmented by his simulacrum – that Snape blocked effortlessly.

But Tonks had seen him too. Harry didn't recognize her spell – a burst of gold light now – but it shook even more dust from the ceiling and Harry could see Snape grimace as he blocked the spell –

He didn't wait. "Stupefy, expelliarmus, stupefy!"

But Snape blocked all of them again, and slashed his wand down...

Harry suddenly felt Tonks' hand on his shoulder, yanking him downwards, and he hit the dusty carpet – an instant before the flurry of knives launched from Snape's kitchen soared over them, punching so many holes in the window behind them.

But Tonks wasn't going to stay down for long. Her Trip Jinx – cast low – nearly broke through Snape's defense, but he somehow managed to block it. He flicked his wand at his wall of books, and Harry could see some of the bindings begin to glow red –

He jabbed his wand at the wall. "Protego!"

His shield sprung up a second before jets of white-hot flame erupted from the bindings before instantly disappearing. In an instant, the dust filling the air was complemented by roiling smoke, and Harry found it hard to catch a breath, even as he heard a rustle coming from behind him...

This time, he had to yank Tonks down, as the flurry of knives came rushing back. But he heard Tonks swear softly, and with a rush of horror, he could see the long paring knife sticking out of her back and the slow trickle of blood seeping down her robes –

He snapped.

Recklessly leaping up, he slashed his wand down. "Flamma lacero!"

The vertical bar of flame seared across the room, carving deep scorch marks on every surface it touched – but somehow Snape got a shimmering shield in front of it, causing the fire to dissipate into thick, opaque clouds of steam...

Harry took his chance.

He charged straight into the cloud, instinctively sidestepping Snape's curse as he followed Snape's hurried footsteps towards the back door. The air was scalding hot, but he ignored the pain and stretched out his fingers, getting his fingers on black fabric –

The jolt threw him backwards, and he hit something – it was hard to tell with all of the steam. His back exploded with pain, but he scrambled to his feet and ran towards the back door towards the tiny walled off courtyard –

But Snape was waiting.

The curse caught Harry before he could even cast a spell. Without warning, he felt his feet leap out from beneath him, yanking him upside-down by his feet, his wand nearly slipping from his fingers as he looked around wildly for Snape –

Who had moved far too close, and Harry felt an eruption of pain from where the man's wand touched his thrashing arms, followed by a numbness that was somehow even worse –

And then, without warning, it was gone. He heard a muffled shout, and without warning, the spell on him broke. He fell backwards, landing hard again on his back, but he didn't care, he wanted Snape down, he wanted him dead –

What he saw was much different.

Standing proudly on top of an unconscious Snape was a black shaggy dog – who instantly transformed into Sirius Black, completely soaked by the rain as he held his wand to Snape's throat.

"Gotcha," Sirius said triumphantly, Summoning Snape's wand into his hand, "Snivellus."

"We need to get him inside," Harry wheezed, struggling to his feet and nearly slipping on the grass as his back screamed with pain. "We need to help Tonks –"

"I'm fine."

Harry whirled, his eyes widening with disbelief –

To see Tonks leaning heavily against the doorway, a bloodstained knife in her hand. She gave Harry a wan smile and tossed the knife on the grass. "I was wearing armour too, Harry." She winced in pain. "Course, the blade was magically sharpened and nearly sliced straight through it and me at the same time, but I'll live."

"You should still get things patched up," Sirius said with concern, kicking Snape in the ribs almost distractedly. "And we all need to clean up before anybody notices – even in this shithole, there's going to be somebody smart enough to call the Muggle authorities."

"Okay," Harry said, wiping a smear of his own blood off his face – he hadn't even felt the gash against his forehead. It must have been debris... it's not much, but it's bleeding freely... "Tonks and I will help

patch each other up. Sirius, you're on clean-up - and then you start the interrogation. We'll join in when we're ready."

A grim smile broke across Sirius' face. "Oh, I've been looking forward to this," he whispered, "for a long, long time."

"My Lord..."

Voldemort paused, and then slowly closed the book on the podium. "Bellatrix. You have news?"

"I have two... two letters, my Lord," Bellatrix said, her eyes fixed on the space immediately next to and above her master.

Voldemort raised his wand and the two open letters shot into his open hand. The first...

"The Italians are planning a trip."

"They appear to have called your bluff, my Lord," Bellatrix said, a hunger burning in her eyes. "Would you grant your servant the chance to make them direly regret that decision?"

"No, Bellatrix, I believe I will keep that pleasure for myself," Voldemort said curtly, incinerating the letter instantly as he unfolded the second letter. "A message from Hogwarts."

"I already read it, my Lord," Bellatrix said, her mad eyes dancing. "It plays into our plan beautifully."

"So it does," Voldemort replied, burning that letter without a second thought as he turned to Bellatrix, whose eyes had drifted to the semi-solid form hovering around him.

His lipless mouth curled upwards. "I see I have rendered you speechless."

"What is it?" Bellatrix asked, her eyes wide, forgetting his title as she stared at it, her expression a mixture between awe and terror.

"This," Voldemort said calmly, "is a theory made manifest in magic." He raised his hand. "To you, it looks like a night sky made into a burning liquid, lit by a million stars and nebula, of things beyond our pitiful earth, spanning the four common dimensions of our universe... but to me, it is something far greater. And it is indeed terrifying and beautiful, both to those who don't understand – and even more so for those who do."

He turned to look at Bellatrix. "Picture a knife with an infinitely tiny edge, capable of severing anything and everything – even the fundamental core of what makes us who we are." Voldemort's eyes gleamed. "Picture a knife that can cut a soul, Bellatrix. Now say we consider the human soul – and for the sake of this experiment, let's make it finite and cut it an infinite number of times, into an infinite number of tiny pieces."

"Would the pieces even remain a soul, my Lord?" Bellatrix asked in a low voice.

"The smartest of Muggle minds have theorized at the smallest point, such particles become nigh-indistinguishable to the methods of man," Voldemort continued, a trace of scorn creeping into his voice. "But a soul is something far more potent, far more distinctive, and even if an infinitely small piece is sent to the other side of the universe an eternity from now, it will remain a fragment of soul, both potent and magical."

He looked at the floating, semi-solid image. "Now say a man cuts a part of his soul into an infinite number of pieces, and scatters them across the universe. Such tiny fragments will not want to stay separate – they are drawn to each other. Say they begin to coalesce with other souls – like, say, that of every human being on this planet."

Bellatrix's breath caught in her throat. "What does that mean, my Lord?"

"If we believe such theories," Voldemort said softly, "it would mean that before one could truly die, every other living thing in the known universe would have to die as well, and never have to face the cold,

skinless hand of death, dragging one down to the unknown dark of oblivion."

"My Lord," Bellatrix whispered, "is such magic even possible?"

Voldemort's small smile deepened as he turned away. He could tell her – his plans had nearly reached a critical mass, and there was nothing that anyone could do that could stop him.

"I have pushed the boundaries of magic further than any man, Bellatrix," he said, turning to face her, his eyes burning, "and I have no intention to stop now."

For a few moments, he couldn't speak. A thousand thoughts, a thousand conflicting emotions, rushed into his mind. Shock, anger, bitterness, relief, joy, horror...

"How?" Even forcing the word, his voice was barely above a choked whisper.

"Black rescued him from Azkaban," Aberforth replied tonelessly. "Brought him back here. Apparently he's dying of magical consumption."

He had already known his father was dying – he remembered hearing that from Dolohov in Azkaban – but he hadn't seemed to care all that much. After all, he hadn't seen his father in over a decade. And I made whatever peace I could have made with his treason a long time ago, no matter how little sense it made...

He turned to where Dumbledore was leaning against the wall, not making eye contact. "Why? You planned this."

Aberforth rolled his eyes. "Can't prove that either –"

"You're a fucking Dumbledore," Kemester snarled through clenched teeth. "These twisted plans are what you do –"

"Or maybe," Aberforth replied quietly, still not looking up, "I do indeed have a soul, and figured you might want to see your father before he

died alone. You know, something I would have killed for." He shook his head. "Apparently I figured that you'd actually care."

Kemester was about to say something – he wasn't entirely sure what he was going to say, but something – but then he heard a noise from behind him. The sound of rustling beneath sheets...

Claudius Kester was waking up.

"You should really say or do something," Aberforth said, his tone bitter and biting as he stood and moved towards the stairs. "This'll probably be the last time you ever see him – alive, that is."

Kemester fought back his desire to scream with frustration as the wave of emotion threatened to seize control of him again. The sick bastard planned all of this... what should I say, what can I say to him, after all this time... how can I tell him Bartholomew's gone...

"Who is it?"

The man's voice was weak, but held all of the authority it once had. In an instant, Kester felt like he was ten again, listening to his father's lectures about peace, stability, enforcement, the law...

He didn't answer his father's question – he couldn't, what was he to say? He had to say something, but what? Ask why he had betrayed the Ministry and everything he had believed? Ask how he could have betrayed his sons, and everything he had taught them?

"I know someone's there," Claudius Kester said, a biting note creeping into his voice. "Come out... come out where I can see you."

He remembered the last time his father had said that to him. The memory came rushing back – he had been standing in the changing room at Madam Malkins, and he had hated the new dress robes, but his father was convinced they looked dashing on him. He had been fifteen, it had been 1981.

His father had gone to Azkaban before Yule that year.

He still didn't think he could say anything, but he did step forward, keeping every expression off his face. He doesn't need to know everything I'm thinking right now... I'm not a child anymore...

The old man's eyes widened as he saw the brutally scarred Hit Wizard standing before him. "Merlin... by Merlin... Dmitri? It can't... Dmitri?"

"I don't know why you named me that," Kemester said, his voice choked as his hand spasmodically clenched and unclenched. "Nobody in our family's Russian or Eastern European – it's confusing."

"My god," Claudius Kemester whispered, his pale blue eyes widening. "It... it... Dmitri, what happened to you?"

Kemester closed his eyes, forcing back the rush of emotions. I'm not going to show weakness here... I'm not going to give anything away.

"Life," he replied simply. "Life happened."

"How did you find me?"

How could he answer that? Where to even begin? "At this point, Father," Kemester replied carefully, "I honestly don't know."

"And you're a Hit Wizard..."

Despite himself, he couldn't help feel the fierce rush of pride surge through him, electrifying every nerve. "Damn right I am, and a... and a..."

He couldn't say the words 'and a good one too', no matter how much he wanted to. That's what he had wanted to be, what he always wanted to be... but he couldn't say it. He was a Hit Wizard, but he wasn't good. He didn't have that sterling career with the plaques and the medals and the promotions and the glory... his was filled with poorly healed scars, sleepless nights, and empty bottles of goblin rye.

Where had things gone so wrong?

"Where...where's Bartholomew?" Claudius asked, his eyes brightening a bit as he struggled weakly – in vain – to sit up a bit. "You made it..."

And here it was. Why does it have to be me saying it? Why do I have to be the one to tell him? It's not right, it's just...

He swallowed back the hard lump in his throat and finally met his father's eyes.

"Father, Bartholomew's gone."

The old man blinked several times, as if he couldn't believe it – and then he took a deep, shuddering breath to compose himself.

"I assume... I assume he went out like a hero?"

"The best kind," Kemester whispered, blinking as quickly as he possibly could.

His father sighed heavily, and then leaned back on the pillow. "Well," he began calmly, "at least he's in a better place –"

Something snapped.

He couldn't hold back the tidal wave of raw emotion anymore. Everything rushed forward, and even as he felt the first tears burn in his eyes, he could hear himself screaming –

"-IS THAT ALL YOU HAVE TO FUCKING SAY? THAT HE'S IN A BETTER PLACE? DO YOU NOT EVEN CARE ABOUT HOW HE DIED? ABOUT WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED TO OUR LIVES? OH, WAIT, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE CARED, YOU FUCKING LEFT US! EVERYTHING YOU SWORE WE KEEP SACRED, YOU BETRAYED IT ALL, 'FATHER'! WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FUCKING 'LAW', IT DIDN'T SAVE HIM, AND IT CERTAINLY HASN'T SAVED ME? LOOK AT ME – I'M MORE DEAD THAN ALIVE! THEY ALL THINK I'M INSANE, THAT I'M 'DAMAGED GOODS' – AND LOOK AT ME!

THAT'S ALL I AM, YOU HYPOCRITE – THAT'S ALL YOUR FUCKING 'LAW' GOT ME!"

He took a deep breath to keep screaming – he could keep screaming from now until the end of time for all he cared, but he saw his father's stony expression and it enraged him even more, so much so he couldn't even muster the words.

"Are you quite finished?"

"Go to hell," Kemester whispered, swallowing hard as he wiped his eyes and grimaced as he felt the fragile skin around his scars start to burn at his touch. "I've already ruined my life enough without you back in it."

"Would it help," the old man said quietly, "if I said you didn't understand the whole picture –"

He couldn't believe his ears. "Not... not understanding... ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?"

"Dmitri, please –"

"You want to know what Yule was like that year?" Kemester snarled, breathing fast. "No, don't get up, I'm going to tell you – we went to Mum's grave, early in the morning, because neither of us could sleep that night in that house. And then we went back to the house, and Bartholomew made pancakes, and then the owl flew in and dropped our Prophet on the table and you want to know what was on page twenty-three, Father?"

The old man didn't respond, no real expression on his face.

"It was an article," Kemester whispered, "a little editorial opinion piece from some batshit witch out in Hollyhead, who said that 'she couldn't quite believe how a good, upstanding Wizengamot judge, a widower with two promising sons, could betray his country and sell out to the enemy. Guess that means the entire line is corrupt, and we better tear out the tree at the roots before any more bad apples come up!'" He was crying now, and his face burned with agony, but he had

stopped caring. "And then Bartholomew reads the article – the entire damn article – and he can't say a damn thing, because he doesn't understand it either, and he's crying into my arms, and... and then he says, 'How come Dad doesn't love us anymore? How could he do this?' And I can't answer." Kemester clenched his fist and dragged his fist across his eyes. "So that was Christmas, Father – so why don't you be a good sport and just explain to it to me, just so I get some fucking closure out of this?"

The old man's expression – much to Kemester's complete fury – was still blank for a long few seconds. Then, he sighed and pointed at the battered cabinet.

"There should be a Pensieve in there, I reckon – I remember seeing it when I first arrived. Get it out."

"Has he said anything?" Tonks asked, drawing her wand as she stepped out of the tiny bathroom.

Sirius didn't immediately answer, instead peeking over her shoulder to where Harry was standing. "You two didn't –" he began slowly.

"No, are you crazy?" Harry protested quickly, drawing his own wand and tucking his simulacrum's hair back behind her ears as he slipped out behind her. Not because I didn't want to... we were so close...

"Get your head out of the gutter, Sirius, nothing happened," Tonks said with an irritated snort, looking at Sirius and the bound silhouette of Snape sitting in the kitchen. "So, has he said anything?"

Sirius scowled with frustration. "Well, we can't use Veritaserum because of that damn Liar's Heartstone junk he invented, and a few punches to the face aren't getting us anywhere. Honestly, I'm not sure physical pain is the method we want to be using."

Harry frowned, but Tonks put her hand to her forehead. "Could have told you that, Sirius –"

"Not for the reason you might think, though," Sirius said quietly. "I reckon if Voldemort's used the Cruciatus Curse on him for any

extended period of time, nothing I'm going to say or do is going to do squat to him – and Snape had a high pain tolerance going in."

"And I'm sure you whaling on him hasn't helped matters," Tonks snapped, uneasily snapping a glance at the repaired windows. "Any sign of trouble?"

"Not even a daft old lady complaining about the noise," Sirius replied, frowning slightly. "Even I'm a little surprised – you'd have thought the Muggles would have done something by now."

Harry stepped around Tonks and Sirius and slowly walked to where Snape was tied to a kitchen chair. The light glowing from his wand illuminated his heavily-bruised and bloody face. Both eyes were nearly swollen shut, and blood from his nose painted the bottom half of his long face.

He almost looks like me when Kemester caught me, he suddenly thought uncomfortably, but this is different – after everything Snape's done... but still, if he hasn't talked yet, what can we really do to get any answers?

He turned to where Tonks and Sirius were watching him. "I don't think we're getting anything out of him."

"Yeah, that's what I was saying," Sirius agreed, shaking his head with frustration. "You know, this still doesn't make a lot of sense. This feels... I dunno, too easy somehow. I was expecting... well, I dunno what I was expecting, but this just seems cheap. I still think we're being set up."

"Then maybe we should get out of here and take Snape with us, so we can have some control of the situation," Tonks said tersely, throwing another uneasy glance at the window as her hair darkened to crimson – that nearly matched the blood on Snape's face. "I mean, we can take him to where the Shrieking Shack burned down, nobody goes there."

Harry didn't respond, his mind racing. "Snape... Snape would have had a reason for making himself this easy to find and bring down," he said slowly. "He would have planned something."

"What are you thinking?"

"Well, it might not be a bad idea to search the place," Harry replied, looking around the grubby kitchen and the sitting room just adjacent. "Sirius, did you find anything when you repaired things?"

Sirius shifted uncomfortably as he walked over a cabinet and pried it open, pulling out a wide shallow basin that Harry immediately recognized as –

"Okay, seriously, does everyone have these things?" Tonks said exasperatedly, glaring at the Pensieve. "First Dumbledore, then your family, Sirius, then Dumbledore gives one to Harry, then Alastor, and then I think I saw one at Aberforth's –"

"Uh, Tonks," Harry said slowly, "that is the Black Pensieve."

Her hair went white for a few seconds as she took a closer look – and as Sirius brought it into better light, the truth was revealed – it was indeed the grimy, dirty Black Pensieve, that Harry had once used all those months ago. I can hardly remember that night... I just must have been burned out or something...

"I'll be damned," Tonks murmured, carefully eyeing the device, "but how on earth did Snape get it?"

"He had access to Grimmauld Place just like everyone else," Sirius said with a scowl, setting the Pensieve down on the small kitchen table, within clear vision of Snape. For the first time since Harry had seen him at the house, the man visibly tensed at the sight of the basin. "He could have swiped it then. And from the looks of things, there are memories in here!"

"Some people use Pensieves to store memories they don't want to think about," Harry said quickly, glancing from the basin to Snape to

Tonks. "Do you think we could find something in there that could provoke him into giving us what we need?"

Tonks hesitated, her hair flickering to a pale green as she looked at Snape. "It just doesn't seem like something Snape would do," she finally admitted after a few seconds, "but then again, I'm not entirely sure what I believe, pulling from his file. I just don't know."

"Still arguably worth viewing," Sirius said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm going in."

"Me too," Harry added.

"Wait, we can't just leave him here!" Tonks protested. "Let me cast some protective enchantments and an alarm spell first so we can at least be warned if something shows up. And what about Snape?"

Harry smirked, and pointed his wand at his former Potions Professor. "Stupefy!"

Snape went limp, the ropes the only things now holding him in a sitting position.

"Well, that works," Sirius said amicably. "Cast your charms, Tonks, and then let's see what Snape has to hide."

Tonks cocked an eyebrow. "And lose out on all of your vaunted magical expertise? Get your ass over here."

The two of them stepped into the main room and began muttering enchantments, but Harry wasn't listening. He approached Snape instead, lying limply in the chair, wondering what in the world the man was thinking. He's done something here... something strange, something that we haven't prepared for... but why can't I just figure out what it is...

"Unless you want to give him a kiss for good luck," Sirius said, stepping back into the kitchen with a wry smile on his face, "I suggest we get moving."

"I should just kiss you for good luck," Harry replied sarcastically, stepping away from the comatose Potions professor.

"Aww, a kiss from my godson," Sirius said lightly, before pausing. "Or would it be goddaughter?" He put a finger to his slightly unshaven chin and frowned. "Can't always tell – ow!"

"If you're finished being weird for the sake of it," Tonks said, rolling her eyes as she blew on the tip of her wand (fresh from smacking Sirius on the back of the head) and slid it back into her robe pockets, "we should really get moving. Ready?"

Harry took a deep breath. The Potter Vaults information could be in there... this is it.

He took Tonks' and Sirius' hands, let out his breath, and leaned towards the Pensieve, his nose brushing the silvery memories lying at the bottom...

The world tilted violently, and he could feel himself falling and falling, speeding towards a darkened picture... but the fall was longer than it normally was, going into a Pensieve. They were falling faster and farther this time, and he wondered for a second whether or not Snape had indeed set a trap for them...

They all hit the ground hard, sprawling across the stone floor – a grimy stone floor Harry recognized instantly.

"This is a Ministry interrogation room," Tonks said quickly, scrambling to her feet and pulling Sirius up as she looked, wide-eyed around the small, badly-lit room, complete with the metal table and mounted, bladed vambraces. "What the hell is –"

BANG

Harry nearly jumped as the concealed door was flung open, and two figures entered the room. Both were wearing black cloaks and hoods, although it was clear one of them was manhandling the other with grim, professional efficiency. There wasn't any fighting or wild thrashing, like when Sirius had dragged Mulciber in.

With a smooth, efficient motion, the dominant figure seized the other figure's wrists and slammed his forearms onto the table before deftly pulling the lever and sealing the other man's arms within the vambraces. But to Harry's shock, the dominant figure (who Harry guessed was likely an Auror or a Hit Wizard) drew his wand and waved it once, conjuring a stiff-backed iron chair directly beneath his prey. That's new.

Another wave of his wand and the prisoner was revealed. His eyes were heavily shadowed, and his hair hung heavily around his eyes, but his face was immediately distinctive.

The younger version of Snape shook his hair out of his face and glared at his captor. "Is this necessary? I said numerous times I would come quietly." His sallow voice dripped with irritation as he tried in vain to shrug his shoulders towards the vambraces holding his arms down – an action that looked utterly ridiculous.

The other man pulled back his hood, and Harry's eyes were immediately drawn to the man's face. Pale blue eyes, a narrow nose, a neatly trimmed black goatee, and a stony, almost implacable expression, and as Harry saw the man pulled off his leather gloves to reveal a dark metallic right hand, he knew immediately this wizard was dangerous.

He looked to his godfather. "Sirius, you know him?"

A cold smile lit Sirius' face. "Harry, what you need to understand is that not all Hit Wizards are like Kemester. There was a time when they were symbols of professionalism, intellect, and power, even above some Aurors – and that man is one of the reasons why. Say hello to Nathaniel Charon, one of the best that group ever gave the fight against Voldemort." His smile deepened. "And now I get to watch him beat the crap out of Snape. Harry, pay attention – this is going to be awesome."

"I don't trust Death Eaters," Charon said calmly, setting his gloves down on the table. "Even ones that surrender."

"I am no longer working directly for the Dark Lord," Snape said quickly, his eyes darting nervously around the room – and really, Harry wasn't surprised. Charon was intimidating. "I swear that."

"I don't believe you," Charon replied tonelessly, walking slowly around the table to stand behind Snape. "Nothing personal, Snape, it's just I've seen a lot of good men die recently, and I'm smarter than to believe anything."

"Would you believe that I've defected to Dumbledore's cause," Snape asked through gritted teeth, "that I've turned spy for our side, at great personal risk?"

"Does that mean I have to add you to my Christmas cards list?" Charon asked sardonically, grinning slightly as he continued his circle around the table. "Don't get me wrong, Snape, but I would find it very difficult to write messages of holiday cheer inside your card, being a Death Eater and all."

"What are you – it's March," Snape said, frowning with confusion.

"I figured I would start sending cards early this year, make sure people get them," Charon replied, his voice going abruptly cold. "You know, since your friends have a reputation for killing my friends... and family. So, let me get this straight – if you're now on our side, does that mean your friends are killing your other friends?"

Snape's face contorted with anger, but he steadied his breath. "Strangely enough, yes, that is exactly the problem."

Charon snorted. "Damn, Snape, I have to say it: your life is just sad."

"You don't know the half of it."

"So I guess you can explain why I caught you skulking around on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow?" Charon continued, resuming his circle around Snape. "Paying a visit to new friends... or is it old ones?"

Snape strangely swallowed hard before he spoke. "Some of both, actually."

"Some of both?" Charon's tone was a mixture of interest and amusement. "You actually have friends that fit both categories? Must be some interesting people... so what was the purpose of the visit?"

"A warning," Snape muttered. "She's in danger, in way over her head –"

"Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt," Charon interjected lightly, "but this friend is a girl? Girls actually talk to you, Snape?"

Snape looked ready to kill something, but Charon only chuckled and drummed his fingers on the table. Sirius couldn't help but laugh a bit at the same time, although from the look of impatience on his face, Harry guessed his godfather wanted to see Snape get punched instead.

"But that was childish," the Hit Wizard said fairly, completing his second circle around the table. "So why don't you tell me your friend's name – I'm sure she'd vouch for you –"

"No," Snape blurted, a hint of crimson creeping into his pale face. "I... I don't think she would... I wasn't planning on –"

"Getting caught?" Charon's voice deftly cut into Snape's rambling. "Sure you weren't. So why don't I pass along this message to –"

"Lily Evans."

Harry's mouth fell open. What.

Charon looked slightly surprised only for a second – and then he sighed and shook his head.

"You sad bastard. And it's Lily Potter now."

Snape didn't respond, but Harry took a step back against the wall with shock. Since when was Snape – Severus Snape – friends with his mother, or even having any type of relationship with her at all?

He quickly turned. "Sirius, was my mum ever... Sirius, what haven't you been telling me?"

Sirius let out an exasperated sigh. "Yeah, they might have been friends, but after fifth year, something went wrong and they never talked to each other again –"

"And you didn't think to tell me this?" Harry exclaimed, looking wildly from the memory of Snape to his godfather. "You knew this entire time –"

"I honestly thought Dumbledore already told you!" Sirius replied hastily. "I mean, it didn't matter, she didn't speak with him for years until she died – he wasn't a part of her life at all!"

"Tonks, did you know about this?" Harry asked, rounding on her, but she shook her head, her lips pursed in thought.

Charon shook his head. "You do realize that if you had gone there, you'd have been dead."

"I –"

"No, Snape, you would have been dead," Charon growled. "She's a member of Cassane's team, and she's been with that group for a while. If you had gone over there, we'd be rinsing you off the pavement." He scratched his goatee and shook his head. "Guess that means I saved your life." He frowned slightly, as if he wasn't sure whether to be relieved or annoyed. "Huh. Well, I'm glad I've got something for the Christmas card now."

"That – that's what I wanted to talk to her about," Snape said in a low voice. "I've heard the stories from both sides, of what's happened since last September –"

"I don't think that conversation would have lasted very long," Charon said quietly, and at that second, Snape finally lost his composure.

"Fine, so I would have died, but it would have meant something! It would have been a message, she would have realized what she's

doing, what they've done, is just as insane as what the Dark Lord has done –"

Charon shook his head sadly. "Yeah, your death would have meant precisely squat, Snape. Sorry to disillusion you, but even Crouch has written that group off as a lost cause. I think the only reason the Ministry is still paying them is because they keep delivering bodies they say are Death Eaters – and most people in the Ministry are too damn terrified of Cassane to say otherwise."

"Dumbledore –"

"Got as many people as he could out of the group before things went to hell," Charon interrupted grimly. "And otherwise... well, they keep killing Death Eaters, and I think sometimes he's just waiting for attrition to take its toll."

Snape's face went pale. "Until all of one side dies."

Charon shrugged. "It's war, Snape."

"Cassane won't stop, you know."

Charon's expression darkened. "I suspect I'll be dead long before that conversation comes up. But enough about that – what do I do with you?"

Harry took a deep breath. He honestly didn't know what Charon was going to do, even as an icy feeling had crept down his spine as he had heard the Hit Wizard talk about his parents. I'm sure it's mostly exaggeration – otherwise, someone would have told me –

"And here's the funny thing," Charon continued, conjuring a cheap lawn chair beneath himself, on which he immediately sat and put his dragonhide boots on the table. "Technically, I don't have any outstanding warrants for your arrest, any crimes I can directly tie you to, and other than the expensive tattoo on your arm, pretty much diddly squat other than being a creep – and I don't send people to Azkaban for being creeps."

This time, Sirius' mouth dropped open. "I don't bloody believe it," he whispered hoarsely.

"So I think I'll just let you go," Charon continued with a shrug, giving the lever by the side of the table a short kick that unlocked the vambraces and freed Snape's arms, who young man immediately slid back into his chair, quickly examining the two shallow cuts on his forearms where the bladed edges of the vambrace had pressed against his skin.

"I mean, you're not harmless," Charon said calmly, "but you're not going to hurt anyone on our side, because you're not that moronic either. Now, I could just escort you straight to Cassane's group so you can get what you were wishing for –"

"I'd prefer you didn't," Snape interrupted quickly.

" – But I'm not one for supporting what's he's doing," Charon said, glaring at Snape. "Maybe if Bellatrix Lestrange was dragged in, but you?" He snorted as he pulled a wand from his cloak and tossed it on the table. "You're not worth my time."

Snape snatched up his wand instantly and returned Charon's glare as he stood. "So if I were to ask your advice?" he asked sarcastically.

"Get out of England while you still can," Charon replied seriously. "Because if things keep up the way they are, things won't be pretty. Oh, and before you Disapparate, one question."

"What?" Snape snapped.

"You have family?"

"Why?"

"Because you might want to take them with you," Cassane replied conversationally, "otherwise they tend to disappear – or worse, appear in our morgues, courtesy of a certain someone. And I'm fairly certain they already know you're here – and for some of them, that's all they need."

For the first time, Snape looked a little shocked. "You... you can't be – how can you let him get away with –"

"If I could prove it," Charon said quietly, "he wouldn't be. Get out."

Harry closed his eyes, but the Disapparation still threw him off-guard, depositing him – and Sirius – on the dirty asphalt. Tonks dropped into a crouch, her eyes scanning for Snape –

"He's going towards..." Tonks' voice trailed off. "Oh, no goddamn way."

The houses around them were in slightly better repair, and the night wasn't as dark, but Harry recognized the street instantly – he had charged down it less than an hour earlier, and Snape was running towards the house – his house –

"I honestly thought Charon would have punched him," Sirius complained as they ran up to the door that Snape quickly threw open and slammed shut behind him.

"Yeah, who would have thought Charon actually had character?" Tonks retorted as they stepped right through the wall into the house. "Honestly, Sirius –"

"BOY!"

The shout threw Harry off-guard, and he could see Snape wince at the shout. For a second, Harry was strongly reminded of Uncle Vernon, but this shout was rawer, and slightly slurred – and lacked all of the anger that his uncle once had. It was more of a shout delivered by habit rather than any genuine loathing.

But Harry wouldn't have guessed it from Snape's face, which was twisted into an expression of mingled panic and hatred as stepped into the sitting room.

The room had changed over the years to the austere, neglected study that Snape had created. This room had no bookshelves – in

fact, it was mostly empty, with a few yellowing pictures hanging on the cheap wallpaper. A cheap television sat on a shoddily-built stand, the picture beginning to break up the second Snape walked in the room

And in the single rickety armchair in the room was a man that could only be Snape's father. But while Snape was lean, this man was bulky, looking like a powerful man gone to seed, most of the muscle replaced by flab. His hair was greying and thinning, hanging around a face that seemed flabby, but yet hollowed by the years.

In one of the man's hands was a bottle of beer. In the other was a short, snub-nosed Muggle pistol.

"Why the hell do you have that thing out?" Snape demanded. "Does it even still work?"

The father snorted. "IRA on the telly again – thought I'd check, see if it was fighting ready in case any of the buggers tried something. And figured if ye brought back any of your worthless kind, I'd have me a loud answer for them."

Snape took a steadying breath, but it was a mostly futile effort. "You might get your wish if you stay around here. Of course, by then you'd be dead and I along with you. Come on, we need to move."

"Why do ye – what are you –"

"Tobias Snape," Snape snarled, "if you do not get out of this house in thirty seconds, you are going to die. This is not a possibility – this will happen. If you want to keep living and disgrace the family's name further, then get the hell out of the house, they are coming."

"Good!" Tobias Snape snarled, unsteadily standing, "and I'll be ready for the bastards –"

But Snape had lost his patience. Whipping his wand out, the pistol and beer were yanked from his father's hands and flung against the wall. The beer bottle shattered, leaving another stain on the wallpaper.

"It's that easy," Snape said in a low voice. "Get out the back, go to Richard Evans' house and tell him to bring the police in – they aren't insane enough to break the Statute of Secrecy. I will buy you time."

The older man's eyes narrowed. "What are ye planning, boy?"

"Saving your worthless life," Snape snapped. "I owe Mother that much. Now go!"

Tobias Snape looked at the tip of his son's wand for a long second before scooping up his pistol by the wall, and stepping into the kitchen. Harry heard the backdoor slam.

A long, tense ten seconds counted in the room, and Harry looked at Sirius, who seemed to be concentrating very hard on something –

Knock knock

Snape turned slightly and raised his wand. With a subtle twitch, he sent a jet of sparks at the doorknob, turning it slightly, letting the sparse wind push the door wide –

To reveal Lily Potter, her wand drawn, her battered armour caked in blood, her eyes completely dead.

Harry's breath caught in his throat as his stomach roiled with growing horror. She was unmistakably his mother – the hair and the eyes told him that – but something was different about her from the last time he'd seen her in Cassane's memory. There were no scars on her face, but something had happened to her that had sapped the blood from her lips, cast her eyes in deep dark shadows, and sucked the energy from her expression. If she wasn't unmistakeably holding her wand with intent to kill, Harry would have expected her to pass out where she stood.

He could hear Sirius swear under his breath, and he suddenly felt Tonks' hand slip into his. He hadn't even realized his hands had been shaking.

"Lily," Snape whispered.

"Severus," Lily replied. Her voice was completely expressionless as she stepped into the house, her eyes sweeping the room. "Is this –"

"Yes."

She wrinkled her nose slightly. "It smells terrible. No wonder you never invited me over."

"My father didn't clean much after my mother died," Snape said quietly, "and I've been..."

"Busy," she finished, her eyes immediately landing on his left arm. "I saw it coming, you know. James said it for years."

"It wouldn't mean anything to you if I told you that I'm on Dumbledore's side now," Snape said in a low voice. "That you'd be killing an ally, an old friend?"

"And you don't have an iota of proof," Lily replied icily. "So where's your father – figured it'd be best to put the two of you out of your misery all at once."

Tonks gasped. Harry's hand shook worse than ever. And all Sirius could do was stand gaping at the scene unfolding in front of him, with an expression of disbelieving horror on his face.

"Lily, stop," Snape whispered, lowering his wand. "This isn't you – what happened –"

"My parents are both dead, Snape." Lily's voice shook slightly as she stepped closer. "Dad was snooping around, and starting connecting the dots regarding all of the magic attacks. He knew it couldn't be IRA – not all of them. So he went looking – and he found the Lestranges."

Harry suddenly – horribly – understood why he had never gone to see his grandparents on Petunia's side of the family.

"They tortured him, and then they killed him." A tear streaked down Lily's pallid face now. "And then they found Mum, and they killed her"

too. They didn't even go looking for Petunia – they had what they wanted."

She looked down at her flat belly. "And they'll never get to see their grandson."

Harry's mouth fell open. His mother was pregnant – with him. But I was born at the end of July, and this is March –

"The armour's magic prevents me from showing," Lily replied listlessly. "It... he keeps me going, helps me get an hour or two of sleep before I wake up screaming." She looked up at Snape. "Hopefully his mommy will stay alive long enough, kill enough people so this can be over with –"

"Lily, you're not yourself," Snape pleaded, his black eyes searching wildly around the room. "Please, you need to snap out of this, you need to get to St. Mungo's, or someone who can treat you, like Dumbledore –"

"Dumbledore," Lily whispered, "has been fucking useless. He let my parents die – and he let you live."

"Lily, don't do this, you know Dumbledore wouldn't have let your parents die," Snape whispered desperately. "It's irrational, it's suicidal... look at you, you're killing yourself."

"Fine talk," Lily hissed, "coming from a Death Eater."

"You're becoming what you were trying to fight!" Snape yelled, sparks spraying from his wand. "What the Dark Lord has done to you, to Cassane – he's twisting you both, Lily, he's using you to cull the chaff from his forces before he sucks you up like he did with Dolohov!" He shook his head. "Lily, if you come much closer, I will be forced to defend myself and trust me when I say that I will not hold back."

"I expected a duel," Lily replied coldly, raising her wand. "Bring it on."

Snape gave a full bow. Lily didn't bother.

Her spell flattened Snape in mid-bow, cracking the floorboards beneath him.

"Sorry, Severus," Lily said quietly, "but I have orders, and those orders require corpses."

The duel commenced from there, and Harry could hardly follow it. He wasn't sure if it was because the spells were flying so quickly that he couldn't tell who was winning or losing, or if it was his mind could hardly comprehend what he had just seen, what his mother had just said...

In the midst of all of the parried spells and shields, Harry spotted an opening – and Snape took it. His breath caught in his throat –

"Expecto patronum!"

From Snape's wand erupted a massive silvery shape, coalescing into the figure of a doe that stood between them.

Lily paused at this, lowering her wand for a brief second. "It's pretty, Snape."

"It's you," Snape replied quietly, mournfully. "What you were –"

The doe suddenly exploded, and Lily's wand was blazing with fire that Snape only managed to deflect in the nick of time.

"You should have gotten over me a long time ago, Sev," Lily said in a low voice, her short hair fluttering around her face from the waves of heat erupting from the flame burning at the end of her wand. "I did."

She began casting, but somehow he was faster.

Harry could only watch in horror as Snape's spell – a jet of hot blue light – slammed her bodily into the wall. Harry could hear Sirius shout something, but he couldn't comprehend what Sirius was saying as he watched his mother slump to the ground...

Snape dropped his wand and ran to her, his eyes dark and filled with grief. "Lily, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to use this –"

Lily didn't answer. She only met Snape with hate-filled eyes.

And then she began to scream.

The sound was ear-splitting, and Harry clapped his hands over his ears and clenched his eyes shut at the sound as it echoed in the room... before finally fading.

He reached out and pulled Tonks towards him, holding her as he felt her tears on his neck, and then...

"Lily, it's okay."

He heard a sniff as he cautiously opened her eyes and looked at his mother.

Lily looked terrible. Her eyes were red and tears of pain were spilling down her face. "S-Sev... why the... you..."

"The spell targets your grief and guilt," Snape said without emotion as he rose to his feet, "and it sets it on fire. The Dark Lord designed the spell to destroy grief-stricken relatives of those he killed, but it's not Dark magic – it doesn't need to be." He shook his head as he picked up his wand. "The spell can be lethal... but I knew you'd survive. You're strong enough."

"What... what did you..."

"I've given you your life back, or at least enough of it," Snape replied bitterly. "You can either follow your orders to kill me, or you can just leave. After all, I need to get over you, since you're clearly over me."

"Snape, I'm married."

He turned and he saw Lily shakily rise to her feet.

"Not only am I married to the man I love," Lily said, swallowing hard, "but I'm pregnant with his child. I'm not turning away from that, Snape – you have to let go."

Snape opened his mouth to say something, and then simply shook his head. "I've made my choices... I need to go, find my father... my father!"

And before Lily could say something, Snape had started running, shoving past the door and charging down the street. Exchanging glances, Harry, Tonks and Sirius quickly followed, unsure of what they'd see.

"Sev, wait!"

Harry paused, only to see Lily race straight past him, running after Snape as they rounded a corner, towards a neighborhood that didn't look so shabby...

Suddenly, Harry heard a sound... a roar of a loud, noisy motorcycle... a roar that he had heard before –

Sirius' eyes suddenly went wide. "That's... that's the sound of my Triumph – that's my bike – I knew this place looked familiar, I was –"

He didn't get another word, as they rounded the next corner to see none other than a younger Sirius Black, standing in the center of the street, his hands covered in blood as he revved his motorcycle.

And right next to him was the mangled corpse of Tobias Snape. Harry recoiled with revulsion as he saw the thick, gory grooves and gaping wounds on the corpse – and the smear of blood on the front tire of Sirius' bike.

Harry's breath caught in his throat as he grabbed Sirius' arm. "You... you –"

"I don't remember this," Sirius whispered hoarsely, watching his doppelganger rev the engine and laugh – laugh – as he raised his wand in the air. "I don't remember –"

"Lily!" memory-Sirius shouted, his eyes blazing with insane energy. "We got him, finally! We got Snape –"

"You idiot, that's not him!" Lily screamed. "And in the middle of the bloody street –"

"Muggle-Repelling Charms, Lil – save us a bunch of time with the clean-up!" Sirius shouted triumphantly, as if he hadn't even heard Lily's shouts. "You should have told me you knew exactly where he was, I've been trying to follow the Tracking Charm I nailed him with – wait, you said that's not –"

"That's his father, you moron! You got the wrong guy!" Lily screamed, reaching to seize Snape by arm. Harry quickly stepped around Sirius to get a better view of Snape's face – and he immediately wished he hadn't. Harry had never seen Snape look so murderous in his life.

"Lily," Snape said, in a terrifyingly even voice, "I know this makes me a hypocrite, but I feel Sirius Black has outlived his usefulness to our side of the war. AVADA –"

He never got the chance to finish the incantation. Some sort of spell had hit him, sent him sprawling across the pavement, his wand flying from his hand, landing at the feet of –

Harry's jaw dropped. He had been expecting it, in the back of his mind, knew that somehow it would have to end this way, but while he innately knew that fact, the rest of his mind wasn't ready for it.

Nathan Cassane bent slowly and picked up Snape's wand, turning it over in his hands. He was wearing a crisp black business suit, the cut just unusual enough to be distinctive as that of a wizard. The brim of his hat shadowed his eyes, but Harry could still see them. He remembered those brown eyes being filled with life and energy, a spark that he had only otherwise seen in Dumbledore's eyes.

Cassane's eyes were not dead, like Lily's had been, or insane like Sirius', or even dispassionate like Voldemort's.

They were worse.

There was a quiet, simmering energy in those hollow brown eyes – the quiet, flickering energy of a smouldering fire after consuming a building. Grief was in those eyes – grief and pain and resignation that regardless of what he did, it was futile, and that anything and everything beyond the edge of cold merciful death was pointless.

One couldn't reason with those eyes. One couldn't fight against those eyes. One couldn't even hate those eyes. They said nothing, offered nothing, demanded nothing, and cared for nothing beyond the completion of the mission, regardless of pain.

And in that second, Harry felt fear like he hadn't felt since the onslaught of Dementors at the lake after his third year. And like with the Dementors, he felt the hollow despair – except this time, he knew no Patronus would drive it away.

"Severus Snape," Nathan Cassane said calmly, "Death Eater, you have been found guilty of the attempted murder of Sirius Black. I sentence you to die. Lily, dispatch him."

Almost automatically, Lily seized a hold of Snape's shoulder and with a kick to the back of his legs, drove him to his knees. Her wand was at his temple and Harry could hardly breathe –

"Sir, I regretfully refuse."

Cassane frowned. "You do realize that insubordination is punishable, Mrs. Potter. I have no qualms adding another body for the morgues to clear up."

"Nathan, while I will not deny he is a Death Eater," Lily said, shoving Snape forward onto the cold pavement, "he has defected to work for Dumbledore. He has nothing of use for us –"

"He's a Snape," memory-Sirius hissed, stepping off his bike, "and that means he dies, Lily. That was the mission –"

"And you just killed his father!" Lily snarled.

"It was in self-defense!" memory-Sirius protested, reaching into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulling free a tiny bullet. "The bastard tried to shoot me – hit me right in the shoulder, and I –"

"He was a Muggle, Sirius!" Lily shouted. "And he was probably drunk!"

"So?" memory-Sirius' expression was full of disdain. "He attacked me, and he's a filthy Snape – that makes him the enemy –"

"Enough."

They all turned to look at Cassane, who was eyeing Snape without any emotion. "You know the manifesto we wrote, Lily. You know if we show mercy and dignity to our foes... well, we already know they won't show the same to us. It's very simple – it's total war, no exceptions. And we are on the side of right – and with Crouch's laws, we are allowed to do this. You know the rules, Lily – you know what these men have done. You know what Snape likely had to do to earn his Dark Mark – don't his victims deserve the same justice that we seek? Don't you think your father would approve of this, his little girl following the spirit of the law and bringing peace?"

Lily inhaled sharply, but then nodded quietly as she kicked Snape in the ribs before placing the metal heel of her boot on his back.

"Very well," she said quietly. "Except – and this is something you used to know better than anyone, sir –"

Cassane tensed.

"The law can be wrong."

The next second was a blur, and Harry threw his hand up to shield from the hot blue light, but before he knew it, it was over.

He cautiously looked up to see the younger Sirius lying unconscious on the road, Snape somehow holding a wand, Lily wiping blood from

her mouth – and Cassane crumpling, toppling backwards and convulsing on the pavement.

"Good that you still keep an extra wand in your boot –"

"Shut up and help me hold him!" Lily snarled, dropping to her knees and grabbing Cassane's hands before they could begin clawing at his eyes. "Sir! Nathan, snap out it –"

Snape dropped to his knees and methodically seized Cassane's thrashing legs, but it wasn't any use. Foam was beginning to form at the edge of his mouth, and Harry could the outlines of bones in his hands and face began to gyrate –

"Sir, please – goddamn it, Severus, what can we do –"

"The spell will probably kill him," Snape said curtly. "He obviously hasn't internalized his grief properly – he hasn't screamed yet... he's not responding well..."

"Well, can't you do anything?"

Snape bit his lip. "His wife and daughter were killed by Death Eaters, correct?"

"Yeah, but –"

"Do you remember them?"

Lily frowned. "A bit... time seems to have blurred together for the past few –"

"Shove your memory inside his head – it might snap him free of the spell if he remembers who he's fighting for." Snape rose to his feet. "Or it might snap him completely or render him catatonic, I can't be sure. What about Black?"

"Yes, what about me?" Sirius muttered. "Why don't we start with why the hell I can't remember any of this?"

"I'll Obliviate him," Lily said, taking a deep breath. "He doesn't need to know about this when he comes to –"

"Guess that's why," Tonks muttered.

"Nobody needs to know," Snape spat, looking down at his father's mangled body with a grimace. "And what will become of Cassane's gang?"

Lily took an unsteady breath. "It... it depends whether or not he wakes up... or survives this. Either way..." She looked up at Snape. "When I'm in that mind, it's easy, but now... I'm pregnant, Sev." She looked down again at her belly. "I'm really amazed I've done this along as I have."

"You'll be back fighting before too long," Snape said, bending and picking up his father's body. "We both will – perhaps even on the same side."

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about your father," Lily said quietly, looking away. "I... I thought you weren't close –"

"We weren't," Snape interrupted. "I hated him, and he me."

"Then why did you chase after him, try to save him –"

Snape shrugged bitterly. "If I knew, I probably wouldn't have hated him so much. I'm sorry about your parents, Lily."

"You know something?"

Snape raised an eyebrow.

"I'd almost say you were right," Lily murmured, rising to her feet, "that their deaths drove me to this, and that you pulled me out before I was gone... except it would be a lie." She blinked, and her eyes grew grim.

"Except that deep down, I still want the men and women who killed my parents to suffer horribly – and at my hands. And that doesn't make me a monster."

She met his eyes, and for a horrifying instant, Harry could see the death return to them. "That makes me human. So long, Severus."

Snape took a step back, and Harry could see that he was more than a little disconcerted by Lily's vehemence. "I need to bury my father. Don't tell Potter this happened – he doesn't need to know. He never needs to know."

"What don't I need to know, Snivellus?"

Harry's breath caught in his throat as his eyes snapped to the figure walking out of the shadows, wearing similar armour to Lily's – but while dried blood had been stained onto her armour, his gleamed with a sullen sheen.

He could hear Snape inhale sharply as he set his father's body down on the pavement, and he saw Lily turn with surprise, but the new arrival didn't quite seem to care as he idly scratched his temple with the edge of his wand, his hazel eyes gleaming with undiluted hatred.

Harry couldn't help but feel his heart pound faster. He looks like me... he almost exactly looks like me -

"Got to wonder what you're trying to hide here," James Potter said conversationally, giving his wand an experimental twirl before pointing it straight at Snape's heart. "Considering from what I've seen, you may have just tried to kill Cassane. It's probably pretty obvious, but I don't take kindly to people trying to kill my boss and a long-time family friend."

Snape's wand snapped up. "Then have you come to kill me, Potter?" He spat the name, his face contorted into an expression of loathing that Harry had long ago become familiar with.

James shrugged, and for the first time, Harry noticed that unlike his mother's expression, his father almost seemed normal. There wasn't

any insane light or deadened stare or pure malevolence in his expression – nothing but crisp, pure professionalism.

"Nothing personal, Snivellus," James said evenly, "but after I married Lily, I pretty much got over hating you – no offense, but you're not really worth my time." He shrugged. "Except for the whole Death Eater thing – and that means you just die."

Lily was struggling to her feet, and for the first time, Harry noticed the unevenness in her breathing. "James, maybe we should –"

"Lily, sweetheart, this is our job," James said lightly, giving his wife a hand up. "If you're up for it, let's handle this like professionals. Otherwise, I've got no problem disposing of him."

Lily took a shuddering breath – and it was almost like she dropped into a trance. The indecision was gone instantly. Her motions grew smoother, her eyes grew colder, and her face lost expression.

It was as if Snape's spell hadn't affected her at all.

"As I said, Snape," James continued, his tone as calm as if he was offering Snape breakfast, "when you're burning in hell, keep in mind there's no hard feelings here. We're just doing our job."

Snape took a step back and dropped into a defensive position. "A wizard's Bonnie and Clyde, then" he spat, his eyes fixed on Lily again.

Lily stiffened slightly at the comment, but James frowned. "I have no idea what that means –"

This time, Snape didn't waste time. Another hot jet of blue light erupted from his wand, slicing straight through James' split-second shield and hitting him hard in the chest.

James staggered back, and Harry's grip on Tonks' hand tightened as he watched his father cough and spit blood....

And before Snape's unbelieving eyes, James shook his head and cracked a disappointed smile.

"Nice try – except I don't feel guilty about the people I've brought down. I bring Death Eaters to justice, Snivellus – it's a job." James snorted. "Granted, it's not a great job – pay's a little weak and the benefits aren't great, but –"

Snape wasn't finished – but Lily was faster. Every single hex and curse Snape cast was deflected, either sizzling away or gouging thick holes in the pavement.

"Snape, I don't think you realize that we've faced your Lord Voldemort and lived," James said with exasperation.

"Twice, James," Lily murmured, coughing slightly and wiping a smear of blood away from her lips.

"That's right – twice, Snape!" James held up two gloved fingers and shook his head. "Do you honestly think you have a hope in all hell of beating the two of us?"

Lily coughed harder, blood spilling from her mouth. "James..."

"Lily – Lily!"

Harry's heart hammered as his mother collapsed, blood spilling from her lips as she began to shake and convulse – just like Cassane had.

James dropped to her side as he looked wildly at Snape. "What – what the fuck did you do?"

"I hit her with the spell a while ago!" Snape snapped, very real panic filling his face as he rushed forward. "This isn't supposed to happen – might be a side-effect of the pregnancy, if the fetus' presence disturbed the spell and she's now having adverse reactions –"

James took a steadying breath as he fought to keep control. "Okay," he growled, "then why don't you tell me how to fix it, Snape!"

Snape closed his eyes, and Harry could tell that he was thinking as hard and fast as he could. "Memories," he finally said. "Give her

happy memories of her parents, any happy memories that you might have. Hell, give her any happy memories – she's strong enough, she should pull through –"

Lily's scream nearly deafened Harry, and his eyes watered as he clapped his hands over his ears at the agonized sound –

"Do something!" Snape roared, snapping his wand up – and his sleeve slid down, revealing the Dark Mark.

A Dark Mark that was burned black.

James' eyes went wide. "Snape, did you –"

"No, but they're coming!" Snape snarled, pointing his wand at Sirius' unconscious form. "Obliviate!"

James' Shield Charm was a second too slow, and Sirius twitched for a few seconds before going still.

"What the FUCK –"

"Have Lily explain it!" Snape snapped, scrambling to his feet and Summoning his father's body into his arms – nearly knocking himself backward from the bulk. "Get her memories and fast, and then get to St. Mungo's – she'll get through, I promise!"

"But you –"

"Would I lie about something like this?" Snape screamed. "About her?"

"What about Cassane –"

Snape closed his eyes. "Do the same for him – but from what he's gone through, if he survives and wakes up from catatonia, I'd run as fast as I could. He'll never be the same again."

Harry didn't understand the comment – he only watched as Snape began to run and James screamed furiously after him. But before he could see anymore, the memory blurred and shifted again...

It was an office, cluttered and filled with disorganized papers. Purple fluttering memos zoomed around the room, waiting to be snagged out the air by the men now entering.

" – it's not a difficult case –"

"You try fighting against Keaton Matthis and tell me it's not a 'hard case'!" the other man snapped. Harry didn't recognize the sallow-skinned man, but he immediately didn't like the feel of him. His hair was slicked back with far too much product, and even his clothes seemed to glisten with oil. There was a clingy air of jittery desperation around his every move, and his voice was painfully nasal.

"I'm asking politely," the other man – Snape, Harry realized – said tersely. "As a favour."

"I don't owe you any favours –"

"No, but you owe my mother one," Snape retorted, slumping into a chair opposite the desk. He looked terrible, as if he had aged years since Harry had seen him. "And I'm calling it in – take the case."

"There is no case, Severus!" the other man snapped, his voice an irritating whine. "We – no, I – can't win this! Not with Matthis! And technically, we don't have anything to defend your position with –"

"Other than the fact that Lily Evans –"

"Lily Potter –"

"That she and her husband were responsible for saving Cassane's life," Snape snarled, slamming his palm on the desk. "She served in the bloody Order after she left and worked part-time as an Auror – what more do you need, Miguel?"

Harry recognized the name now. "That – that's Miguel Prince!" he whispered, trying to keep the raw excitement from his voice. "This must be when they talk about the –"

"I need more," Miguel Prince said flatly, 'because frankly, that's not enough. The victims of Cassane's rampage are demanding justice – and right now, Crouch is listening to them a lot more than he's listening to me."

"Then spin it as Lily neutralizing Cassane then, if that's what you're concerned about!" Snape growled. "Because that's true too!"

"I don't think you understand the politics of this, Snape," Miguel said worriedly, finally sitting down and fidgeting as he looked up at Snape. "Now that You-Know-Who is gone and nominations for Minister are coming up, Crouch knows that he has to curry favour from certain people if he wants the job."

"The populace-at-large –"

"Mean squat when it comes to this and you know it," Miguel said, raising his hands helplessly. "Severus, you know I'm on your side here, but there's nothing I can present to convince a judge not to close the vaults belonging to the Potters for war crimes committed against the populace-at-large! There's an orgy of evidence – most of it delivered in person by the culprits!"

Snape ground his teeth. "Fine, then – use the argument that the money is for her child."

"And if we could present Harry Potter at the hearing, we'd be in the clear!" Miguel cried. "But the problem is nobody knows where the boy is! If you called in Dumbledore –"

"I'm not speaking to that old man," Snape cut him off, his eyes narrowing. "Just because I'm now a professor at his thrice-damned school does not mean I will be reliant upon him." He looked down at his clenched fists. "He has enough power over me already..."

"You're a bloody fool, Severus, that's what you are," Miguel said exasperatedly. "Fine, we won't go to Dumbledore – so you might as well pack your case right in! Matthis has precedent with the Vuneren Vaults, and he has a string of bodies. We've got nothing, Severus – nothing that'll be worth a damn."

Snape took a heavy breath. "What about Cassane?"

"I can't put him on the stand," Miguel said flatly. "Publically, he's a tragic victim, losing his mind when his family was killed – hell, he's been in St. Mungo's for over a year and a half now! He's been catatonic, who knows what he remembers – for Merlin's sake, I can't put him on the stand!"

"He's probably the only man alive who knows the whole truth –"

"Maybe," Miguel admitted, "but I'll look like the villain putting him on the stand, regardless of the judge. Yes, I know he's done things just as bad... but the public favours him, and Crouch has held him up as a hero."

"If you run by that logic," Snape said through clenched teeth, "the Potters are victims just as much."

"And I can't put dead people on the stand to curry sympathy," Miguel replied with a helpless expression. "Severus, I'm sorry, but I can't defend this. Damn it, why do you care about this woman so bloody much?"

Snape didn't answer the question, only rising to his feet, towering over Miguel Prince.

"You are one of the last Princes," Snape said softly, "and that means you owe me the favour promised to my mother. By my Prince blood, I call in the favour. You will defend the Potter Vaults, and you will prevent them from being sealed, am I quite clear?"

"Severus, I'll do my best – wait, Severus! Severus!"

The voice echoed as the room shifted beneath Harry's feet – and suddenly they were in a dank, chill hallway, lit by torches and with heavy numbered doors lining the walls. Snape was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, his unkempt hair falling across his face...

The door next to him creaked open and Snape stood up, his eyes gleaming as they fell on Miguel Prince, his shoulders slumped as he slipped out of the room.

"So –"

"Snape, don't even start," Miguel snapped. "We lost, now go home."

"How can they –"

"I told you we didn't have a case!" Miguel snarled, tossing his heap of papers on the floor. "Matthis mopped the floor with us and even with Claudius Kemester judging, I've never been so humiliated in my life!"

Snape's eyes flashed. "Claudius Kemester – where is he?"

"Probably packing up and heading up to his office," Miguel replied, looking down at his papers sullenly before drawing his wand and summoning them into his arms again. "He seemed like he was in a hurry, so if you want to catch him before his next engagement, you ought to move fast."

Snape set his jaw, and began walking down the hall towards the stairs. He didn't break into a run, not now – he instead stormed down the halls, his cloak billowing behind him. But unlike at Hogwarts, he didn't look nearly as impressive.

"So... this was it?" Harry said as he jogged along behind with Tonks and Sirius. "That's it? Snape apparently tried to defend the faults... and lost? Because he still had feelings for my mum?" He shook his head incredulously. "It just seems..."

"Kind of sad, really," Tonks finished, shaking her head as they ducked into the elevator that Snape stepped into. "It's not tragic... it's just... I'd almost say pathetic, but that's not quite it."

"What I don't get is why he just didn't tell me," Harry said with frustration. "It would have saved us all so much time –"

"You honestly think Snape has ever been that straightforward, or would suffer the embarrassment that this is?" Sirius countered, raking a hand through his hair. "And you'd probably tell me, and... yeah, it wouldn't have ended well."

They got off at the top floor, and Snape set off at a fast pace, darting down a hallway here and there until they reached a tarnished nameplate next to an oaken door.

Judge Claudius Kemester, Wizengamot.

Snape seemed to think for the next few seconds, and then he pointed his wand at the doorknob. Without a word, the lock clicked and Snape was inside. Carefully locking the door behind him, he tapped himself on the head, slowly vanishing from view as the Disillusionment Charm took hold.

"Is he just going to hide and wait?" Harry whispered to Tonks as they looked around the office. It wasn't much to speak of – cheap wooden panelling, several tables strewn with papers around the room, several old paintings on the walls, a few bookshelves, and a large window along the back wall, showing a snowy night. Strangely, there were no curtains on the window – just cheap streaked glass showing a chill London night.

"This must have been early December, 1981," Sirius murmured, looking down at the papers strewn on the desk. "There's a Daily Prophet here... looks like Crouch is nearly at the top... before the Longbottom attacks in February ruined him."

"Why do I get the strange feeling that Crouch might be involved in all of this somehow?" Harry muttered, looking at the paintings on the wall.

"Probably because he's entering the room right now," Tonks replied, pointing at the door, where Claudius Kemester was holding the door for a crisply dressed Crouch, who was brushing a hint of snow off of his lapel –

Kemester was used to Pensieves, but he had never liked them. It had always disconcerted him that he was seeing a scene from somebody else's life, that he was standing inside the scene – and yet regardless of what actually occurred, he could do nothing to alter it.

Reed would say it's my desire to get involved in everything... and he's probably right...

The room he landed in immediately brought back memories – old, old memories. He remembered sitting quietly in the corner of the office, waiting for his father to come from a case. He remembered the papers on every surface that he had never bothered to read, due to the dense text and lack of any interesting pictures. In retrospect, Kemester thought to himself, I would have killed to have read those papers now... what I could have learned...

He remembered peering out the window at the London landscape outside, his hands pressed against the glass. He remembered his father's irritation at the fingerprints.

He remembered walking into that office years later, when it had been given to a different judge – and he remembered grinning slightly when he saw the fingerprints on the window that the elderly new judge had never seen nor bothered to clean.

The door cracked open, and Kemester's gaze snapped to it. He inhaled sharply as he saw his father - younger, albeit his hair still greying – hold the door for a man with a razor-sharp parting and a narrow moustache.

Barty Crouch, former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"So I trust your flight in from York was tolerable," Claudius began, accepting Crouch's cloak and hanging it on a nearby coatrack.

"Smooth enough," Crouch said briskly. "And I trust your case went... well?"

Claudius paused, and Kemester could see his father thinking as he closed the door. "Well enough."

"Well, don't hold me in suspense, Claudius," Crouch said lightly, taking a seat opposite the judge's desk. "Tell me the good news."

Claudius clenched his teeth as he sat down opposite Crouch, on the other side of the desk groaning under the weight of books and papers. "The case is over."

"And?" Crouch pursued, a hungry light in his eyes.

Claudius raised a hand helplessly. "What do you think?"

Crouch broke into a satisfied smile. "That's perfect. Claudius, I'm so grateful for your –"

"Trust me when I say that I did not enjoy this, Barty," Claudius interrupted, his expression icy. "I did not enjoy these cases."

"But you understand their necessity," Crouch returned, raising a finger. "Without them, certain peoples will feel that the war crimes of some have been furnished by our government. This way, we have taken definitive action to placate these people."

"You have taken money that was rightfully that of good people," Claudius growled, "the rewards of their actions –"

"Most of which were never, ever formally condoned by the Ministry," Crouch interrupted.

"Wasn't for your lack of trying," Claudius said bitingly. "If Cassane had agreed to your offers to deputize his unit, you would have never taken such actions."

"I wouldn't say that," Crouch replied lightly, reaching into his robes and pulling a bottle of goblin rye, seeming from charmed pockets. "A drink?"

"Conjured or purchased?"

Crouch huffed. "I'm not an animal, Claudius. This is rye, so purchased, obviously."

Claudius carefully took the bottle and scanned the label for a few seconds before setting it down on a side table and withdrawing a pair of glasses. "I don't find this occasion much to celebrate about, Barty – the Potters used to be friends of mine. And that is why I built in a condition in my judgement for their son."

Crouch's eyes narrowed as he sat up straighter. "That wasn't part of the deal –"

"I don't really care, Barty," Claudius retorted in a remarkably even tone, setting his glass down carefully on a silver coast. "If Harry Potter is able to provide the proper paperwork to the goblins at Gringotts, he is entitled to that money. Granted, there will be surcharges to reopen the vault, but I figure that money will just come out of the bounties the Ministry paid the Potters for everything they did when they were working with Cassane." Claudius smirked. "I look after my friends, and the Potters were always friends of mine."

"Well, while I can respect said... chivalry, times change," Crouch countered, accepting the glass from the judge and taking a short sip. "And sometimes, one must deal with troubles of the past with... modern solutions. Evolving solutions."

Claudius did not raise the glass to his own lips, only fixing Crouch with a stern expression. "Where are you going with this, Barty?"

"What I mean is that I need to make sure my bases are covered, when running for Minister," Crouch replied, taking another sip before setting the glass on a stack of papers. Kemester could see his father visibly twitch at the insouciance – nobody placed drinks anywhere

near Claudius Kemester's paperwork. "Rounding up the Death Eaters, that keeps the unruly common folk in line, but you and I both know it is not them that decide the Minister's position."

"Which explains why you haven't had me go after Lucius Malfoy," Claudius drawled, taking a sip of his rye as he fixed Crouch with a knowing expression. "Even despite all the gold that went into the Ministry's pockets from his vaults."

"We've never paid Malfoy a Knut, Claudius," Crouch said sternly, "and I do not approve of your comparison between him and your cases."

"Why?" Claudius replied innocently. "Both are politics, pure and simple."

Crouch's expression hardened, but he did not respond to the comment, only taking another sip of his rye. "The fact of the matter is," he continued, setting his glass back down on the papers and completely ignoring the twitch in Claudius' jaw, "while I have managed to appease that demographic, it will only be a matter of time before things begin to break down. As time will pass, people will not revile folk like the Potters or Vunerens for the crimes they committed. Cassane will not be remembered for his psychopathic episode, but for the great tragedy that brought him low and destroyed his life. No, history will find a way to tint their careers in rose, paint them as heroes."

"That's because they were," Claudius said in a low voice. "And thanks to your new laws and your private little sanctions, everything they did was almost legal too."

"The point is that their heroics will mean something different depending on perspective and time," Crouch finished calmly, draining the rest of rye and setting the glass onto a different pile of papers on Kemester's desk. "And if I want to capitalize on that perspective, certain actions must be taken."

He reached into his jacket and pulled out an official-looking document.

"What is that?" Claudius asked cautiously.

"It's a warrant, signed by the Minister of Magic herself," Crouch replied, carefully unrolling it and spreading it across his lap.

He looked up at the judge. "And it's for your arrest, Claudius Kemester."

Claudius shot to his feet. "What?"

"You see, I'm planning for the future here," Crouch said calmly, placing the warrant on Claudius' desk. "Planning for when some intrepid young report in, say, two years from now, digs up the old cases and wonders why on earth the Ministry chose to close down the vaults of some of their greatest heroes. And then they'll find your name and understand immediately, as you will be spending a long time in Azkaban for treason to the Ministry and stealing the justly-earned rewards of those poor unfortunate heroes.

"And no," Crouch finished, his crisp cold smile never fading, "you will not get your day in court."

"I'm a judge, Crouch, and I know the legal proceedings backwards and forwards," Claudius snarled, his hands balled into fists, "so you're wrong – I will get my day in court, and I will destroy you!"

"For what?" Crouch replied with a smirk. "I'm a rising star and you... well, you're a spent firework, Claudius. Already forgotten. Who will believe your story – that I, Barty Crouch, one of the heroes of the war, conspired to ruin the career of an irrelevant judge who spent the last days of his career attempting to either cover up the ill-gotten gains of a team of murderers or destroy the fortunes of dead heroes." Crouch's laugh was triumphant.

"The truth means less than nothing to you –"

"On the contrary, it means everything," Crouch retorted, his eyebrows narrowing. "Perception, on the other hand... that is far more malleable."

Claudius closed his mouth, his entire body shaking with suppressed rage. Kemester honestly did not know how his father would react to this. But then again, he suddenly thought, how would I – how could I – react to this? Crouch has trapped him so neatly...

"So you have the choice, Kemester," Crouch said, his voice terrifyingly reasonable. "You can turn me in on your allegations. Odds are, your family's name will be disgraced, along with all of those that you once associated with. Nobody will care that you were the one to reveal the truth about the actions of the Potters or the Vunereus or the Dolohovs – well, perhaps not the Dolohovs, but the point remains – they will only care about said actions, and they will be appalled. Suddenly, neither side will seem so great, and those that do not lose hope and flock to an enemy banner will become disheartened. People like having a clear side to follow – they don't like conflicts where there are no heroes."

Crouch paused and leaned forward, his voice dropping. "So what will you tell your sons, Claudius? Will you tell them the truth, that all of those heroes were really the worst of people? Will you tell them that their father was not only an enabler of that villainy, but also the worst kind of traitor, destroying the hopes of a society already brittle from years of war?"

"I was following the law, Crouch," Claudius said in a low voice. "Ultimately, crimes were committed, and I took the necessary action to mete out justice. And while I hated the judgements I was forced to pass in closing those vaults, the law must remain sacrosanct – even if it is made and maintained by those who are corrupt to the very core." He crossed his arms over his chest. "That is what my sons will remember, that is what they will believe. They will know that their father stood for something greater than himself."

"Those who cling to the law will find it dragging them to the bottom of the sea," Crouch replied softly. "And it does no good to be the last man standing in a ruined field – because that will be the case, Kemester. Your sons may respect your point of view, but when they find themselves unable to rise because their father chose his own foolish pride against what must become the truth, they will resent you,

and hate you, and all of those things you taught them will remain pointless.

"Or," Crouch added, rising to his feet as well, "you can take my offer, and go to Azkaban quietly – I will personally ensure the media and the rest of the Ministry discovers nothing – and I promise I will personally inform your sons of the truth. How their father sacrificed himself for the betterment of his society, because he wanted them to have opportunities for the future, like any good father would. They may not understand it now, but as they grow and rise to the heights of their careers, they will realize the truth."

Kemester closed his eyes as the raging emotions came rushing back. It had been a lie, the entire time – not only was his father innocent, but he had been manipulated by Crouch into a choice he made because he thought it would mean something for his sons.

And Crouch never even bothered to come to our house. He never said a goddamn thing to us before he died... and the truth leaked out anyways.

Claudius looked at Crouch with the air of a man who had been offered a choice – between the gallows and the blood-stained block.

"You will tell my sons?"

"I promise," Crouch replied.

Kemester had seen enough. He leapt into the air, rising faster and faster – he didn't care how the memory ended, he knew how the memory ended –

He came up out of the Pensieve and landed hard on the chair parallel to his father's bed. He was breathing hard, each breath catching in his lungs.

"He lied to you, Father," Kester said in a low voice. "He never told us a damn thing. He never said anything about the choice you were forced to make."

He sighed bitterly. "And if I had to make that choice... shit, I don't know what I would have done. I really don't. I guess you should have just assumed Crouch was a liar, damn his promises..."

He ran a hand over his patchy hair, feeling his lines of his uneven scalp. "I... at least now I know the truth. Bartholomew always said something didn't seem quite right... and he was right, Father. You never betrayed the law... or betrayed us..."

He shook his head. "Father, I.."

He turned to look at his father – and noticed his chest was not moving, and his eyes were closed.

Claudius Kemester was dead.

"You will tell my sons?"

"I promise," Crouch replied.

Harry had heard enough. Taking Tonks' and Sirius' hands, he pushed off from the ground, rising higher and higher until –

"Well, that wasn't what I expected," Sirius began after a few long seconds of silence, running a hand through his hair. "No wonder Kemester's so screwed up –"

"Sirius, something's not right," Tonks said instantly, her hand snapping to her wand as she looked wildly around the room. "This is the study at Snape's house – we entered in the kitchen..."

Harry stretched out his hand to touch the armchair standing next to him – and his hand passed right through it.

"We're still in a memory," he breathed, his eyes latching on the Pensieve and drifting around the room. "That's why it took us so long to fall before –"

Click.

Harry ripped his wand free and nearly cast a curse, but he stopped himself just in time. It wouldn't be useful here...

"Okay," Sirius said in a low voice, "you've got to be fucking kidding me."

For sitting in an armchair, deep in the shadows of the room, was Severus Snape – a modern-looking Severus Snape. He looked exhausted, but his eyes still blazed with the same bitter hatred that they always did.

"For those who have discovered the Pensieve here," Snape said aloud, his eyes fixing on the space behind the basin – where Harry happened to be standing, "let me dispose of the quick questions first. Yes, what you saw within were legitimate memories – my memories, to be precise. From an outside perspective, one could describe them as memories within memories, or my own memories that I am viewing from the context of this memory." His lip curled. "I don't think I can put things any more simply."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "If this message is found by any other than Sirius Black, Nymphadora Tonks, and Harry Potter, you have wasted your time perusing these past thoughts, as I highly doubt they will prove useful to you. You might as well exit the memory before you waste any more valuable time – considering how quickly our world is moving towards oblivion, I would advise you against wasting time."

Tonks shook her head. "I can't believe this."

"If this message has been found by either Sirius Black, Nymphadora Tonks, or Harry Potter in turn," Snape continued, his lip curling with absolute disgust as he spoke each name, "then I have messages to deliver to you."

He turned his head slightly, where Tonks was standing. "Sirius Black."

Tonks hastily grabbed Sirius and shoved him into where Snape was looking.

"You know, it could have been real funny if he was talking to empty air –"

"Just shut up."

Snape's face contorted into a sneer. "Black, I sincerely hope this gives additional context of why I despise you for the pathetically mewling stain upon wizarding society that you are. You are a violent, puerile, hopelessly juvenile pissant who deserves nothing less than a thorough incineration." His eyes narrowed to slits. "And you killed my father – I hope whatever conscience you haven't managed to eradicate makes the rest of your miserable existence even more worthless."

He turned his head now, looking at the left, where Tonks had stepped. "Miss Tonks."

Tonks, despite herself, raised her head defiantly as her hair went neon blue.

"I feel nothing but pity towards you," Snape said coldly. "You have become nothing more than a pawn on two chessboards playing simultaneously, and I suspect your fate will be far worse than dead by the end of this." He shook his head disappointedly. "A shame, because you are competent, and you always have been. But I feel it necessary to warn you that you should terminate your manipulators before they – either by choice or by accident – terminate you." He smoothed a wrinkle from his robes. "And I would add that your feelings are only destroying you further... but I suspect you already know that."

Tonks' mouth fell open. "Are you... is he fucking kidding? After what we saw –"

"I am aware of the hypocrisy," Snape finished with a disdainful snort. "Suffice to say, said criticisms will lack a certain validity now."

He then turned to the middle of his range of vision, and his lip curled again. "Potter."

Harry took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for whatever Snape had to say.

For the first time in the memory, Snape seemed a bit unsure of what to say, but he quickly recovered. "You remind me of your parents in many ways – unfortunately, more your father, and perhaps most unfortunately, enough of your mother to draw my notice." Snape's nostrils flared. "You are not nearly as competent as she is, but that is not relevant anymore. What is relevant is this lesson. And perhaps if you utilize the few scraps of her that you inherited, you will listen to me for once."

Sirius snorted. "What a pantload."

"Potter," Snape continued, slowly rising to his feet, "as you know, I overheard a piece of a prophecy that the Dark Lord now knows in full. He is quite content to destroy your life piece by piece until you confront him and seal your death. You have endeavoured to take actions to choose your own destiny, but such actions will prove futile if you do not realize the truth at the very beginning. Remember that cold night that began all of this, Potter, and the terrible choice you made. By all means continue meddling with magic that is beyond your capacity to understand, but realize the origin – otherwise, your life will be worth less than nothing.

"You now have the information you need regarding the Potter Vaults. Use it wisely – your parents did not kill people and damage their own lives for you to squander their wealth." Snape scowled. "And even though you might find that it has lost some relevance given the fracas of your life, you may find it in your best interest to deal with Hogwarts sooner rather than later."

Snape let out a deep breath and eyed the space where Tonks, Harry, and Sirius stood. "You will not hear from me any further, as I am now far beyond your reach, and it is a waste of time to hunt for me. I do not care for your questions or your petty concerns, as this part of my life is long-overdue for a conclusion. You will never see me again. Yes, Black, I can already imagine the elation on your face, but trust me when I say this." Snape's face twisted into a cruel smile. "Believe

me when I say that a day will come, Black, when you will wish I was still around."

Sirius snorted. "Yeah, fat chance."

"That is all I wish to say," Snape said briskly, giving a brief nod. "The house is rigged to explode two hours after the alarm spells you undoubtedly tripped go off, so I would advise you hurry. Oh, and Black?"

"What?" Sirius snarled, glaring at the memory.

Snape's cruel smile only grew. "There is a reason, after all, why this might have seemed less difficult than you've expected. So if my timing is correct, the Imperius Curse has been dropped, but I think I'll leave it to you to explain to Remus Lupin why you tortured him so brutally."

Harry's mind went blank. What.

"After all, the Polyjuice Potion should have worn off by now."

You'd think, Kingsley thought bitterly, turning the page of the report, that considering the devastation of the Ministry, they'd at least try to cut back on the bloody paperwork...

He nearly rounded on his heel and walked straight back into the Department of Experimental Charms, but he knew it would be fruitless – the majority of the Department had been vaporized months ago, and try as they may, the newest employees were far out of their depth, and without procedure documentation, any analysis commissioned was delayed again and again.

"And to think," Kingsley muttered, "they spent months on this rubbish..."

Thousands of words, hundreds of pages, but Kingsley already knew the ultimate answer that the report contained – that the Department of Experimental Charms were no closer to determining who wrecked the Ministry than he was to catching Voldemort buying pastry.

Another dead end.

He reached the empty elevator and aimlessly pressed the button to return to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The elevator shuddered into motion, the purple memos fluttering around the single dangling light.

And without warning, the light went out, and the elevator shuddered to a stop.

Kingsley's hand flew to his wand, which lit instantly –

And his eyes widened. It couldn't – after all this – it couldn't –

"Ah, but it is."

"But –" His voice was hoarse – he still couldn't believe his eyes. "It can't –"

But before he could utter another word, the light on Kingsley's wand vanished, and he was plunged into impenetrable darkness.

The dawn was clear and cold, without any clouds in the sky. The air was chill, but there was no wind, and the dampness that had been omnipresent the night before was gone.

And yet there was something missing. It wasn't a glorious dawn, one that lit the sky in dozens of vibrant hues or cast majestic shadows over the snowy ruins. Instead, the colours felt dreary, the view unremarkable, as if someone had drawn a haze over the sky.

He sat on one of the few remaining foundation stones of his old hospice, his tattered coat pulled tight around him as he watched the sun rise through the snow-capped mountains. He hadn't been ungrateful for its destruction – too many dark memories – but at the same time, he missed it. Makes all that time nearly twenty years ago feel less real, more of a dream...

He sniffed the air, and shook his head. "How did it happen? How did it burn down?"

He heard the crunching of Sirius' boots on broken masonry as his best friend sat down next to him. "If you'd believe I was the one –"

"Yes, I would believe that."

"Then yeah, it was me," Sirius said, exhaling slowly as he ran his hand through his hair. "To be fair, I was possessed."

"To be completely honest, I'm not particularly sorry it's gone," Lupin replied, shaking his head. "Passage still open to the Willow?"

"Haven't really excavated enough to check," Sirius said, turning to glance at where the secret passage to the Whomping Willow once was. "We can ask Harry or Tonks if they've used it."

"You think Harry will speak to me?" Lupin murmured, toying loosely with some loose rock that had broken away from the boulder. "After..."

Sirius shrugged helplessly. "Moony, I don't know. I can hardly read him anymore, and he took off this morning as soon as he got up."

"You know where –"

"No, but Tonks went after him," Sirius replied as he fiddled with his gloves. "He'll be fine."

"Hope so," Lupin said quietly. "Does he... did you –"

"Yeah, we told him."

"Will he – will he ever forgive me?"

Sirius sighed heavily. "Remus, I told you, I don't know. Harry's going through some heavy stuff right now. And... look, Remus, I don't know. The last time you two spoke, it wasn't handled well."

"That's an understatement."

"I'm guessing it's more that Harry doesn't understand it," Sirius continued, absent-mindedly scratching behind his temple. "I don't either, to be honest – I mean, that doesn't remind me much of the Remus Lupin I knew."

"Sirius, I was alone," Lupin said, his voice hardly rising above a whisper. "In a short few days, all of you were gone... and I couldn't do it on my own. I couldn't risk..."

"That he'd find out?" Sirius asked quietly. "That he'd be ashamed of you?"

Lupin didn't say anything – he couldn't say anything.

"Or that he wouldn't be exactly like his father," Sirius continued, shaking his head with disbelief, "and he wouldn't have accepted someone who cared for him and treated him with anything close to love, regardless of his 'furry little problem'."

Lupin blinked hastily. "Sirius, I'm so sorry –"

"Hey." Lupin felt Sirius' hand grip his shoulder. "I was alone for twelve years – and it's really hard, especially when you think you've got no one. And you don't need to be locked away in Azkaban to feel that way."

Sirius pulled Lupin into an embrace before looking him dead in the eyes. "But that's not the way it is anymore, Remus. I'm not gonna let that happen to you. We're a team – and I don't fucking care what Harry or Tonks or anyone else thinks, but I'm not gonna leave you again. Clear?"

Lupin blinked twice, and then nodded. "Do you think Harry will forgive me?"

"I don't know," Sirius replied honestly, letting go of Lupin's shoulders, "but I do know he'd be a bloody fool to let you go – we're too outmatched as it is. We've all been fools with this – how about we stop with the foolishness for once?"

Lupin took an unsteady breath. "I think I can support that."

"Good, 'cause we need a rational one in our little posse," Sirius said, slapping Lupin on the back. "I swear, sometimes Harry and Tonks get these insane plans and I just get outvoted."

"I'm guessing that's how they started sleeping together," Lupin remarked wryly.

Sirius chuckled. "Nice one. Now before we get back to Aberforth's, we just have one thing left to do." He stuck his hands in his pockets – and then pulled out a very full pipe.

Lupin blanched. "Sirius, I don't want to see that stuff –"

"This is part of our therapy," Sirius replied lightly, drawing his wand. He eyed Lupin. "Besides – as you well know – smoking Knotgrass with a friend is far better than smoking it alone. And we've got some time, so why not?"

Lupin shook his head with disbelief, but he accepted the pipe, which Sirius lit with a prod of his wand.

"So are you ever going to tell me how Harry is apparently a girl and himself?" Lupin asked, taking an easy pull from the pipe

Sirius smirked. "You'd better keep smoking."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't make much sense otherwise."

They laughed, and perhaps it was just Lupin's imagination, but despite the wispy strands of smoke drifting up into the sky, the dawn finally looked beautiful.

She found him wandering in the forest.

Harry adjusted his glasses as he watched Tonks slog through the snow, nearly falling flat on her face as she struggled over a particularly heavy drift.

"Having trouble?"

"Oh bite me," Tonks replied with a huff, getting to her feet and finally reaching the clearing where Harry was leaning against an old oak tree. "You know, if you're going to make yourself as easy to find as you did – the Obliteration Charm is your friend, by the way – you could have at least been close to the Hog's Head."

Harry smirked and raised his hands in mock surrender. "Maybe that was my plan – anybody trying to follow me would have to go through so much snow they'd be tired out by the time they finally found me."

Tonks cocked an eyebrow as she trudged up to Harry, pulling her cloak a little tighter around herself. "Great plan."

"I know."

"I was being sarcastic."

Harry sighed and slid down the trunk until he was sitting in the snow. "Yeah, I know."

Tonks grinned and without warning, plopped down right next to him, nudging him as she tried to make herself comfortable.

"I brought a blanket, you know," Harry said, pulling a thick wool blanket from beneath his cloak. "Wasn't sure how long I was going to be out."

"Well, we don't need it yet," Tonks replied, squirming slightly as she nudged Harry a little harder. "Budge over, I want some trunk."

Harry grinned, but obliged, taking her hand as they sat in the snow at the base of the tree, enjoying the warm light creeping over the trees and the deep, soft quiet.

"How are you holding up?" Tonks asked after a few seconds.

Harry shrugged. "Hanging in there... lot to think about."

"At least we finally know the whole truth about the Potter Vaults..."

Harry exhaled slowly, his breath forming mist. "Yeah, we do... and you know, it wasn't even that complex or extravagant or crazy – okay, well it was crazy, but still..."

"After everything we've been through," Tonks murmured, "it could have been a hell of a lot worse." She glanced at Harry. "Shouldn't have much trouble getting the paperwork we need now – things with the goblins have mostly quieted down."

"You think they would have said something," Harry muttered, "when I first came to Gringotts four-and-a-half years ago."

"Why would they?" Tonks said, her hair going bleach-blonde and lengthening several inches as she stared out into the snow. "Goblins, give up gold? Even if the vault is sealed, the gold is technically in their bank, so to them, it's theirs."

"Yeah, makes sense."

They were silent for a long few seconds, and Tonks turned, her expression slowly filling with concern.

"Harry, are you okay?"

Harry looked down for a long few seconds, and then shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "I'm not okay."

"If it's something you saw –"

Harry snorted. "Yeah, it's every day you get to see one of your closest allies, your godfather, and your parents act like sociopaths. And you know what the scary thing is?" He met Tonks' eyes. "It isn't far off what we've done – or what we would do."

"Harry, there's a reason Alastor worked so damn hard to get debriefing and counselling for Aurors and Hit Wizards," Tonks said firmly, "and you've got that support. Besides, do you honestly think I'd let you get away with that kind of stuff?"

Harry didn't answer. He just held her gaze, and Tonks felt something inside of her go very cold, and she consciously forced her hair to remain blonde.

"I dunno," Harry finally said, looking out into the clearing. "I haven't killed anyone since the accident with Charlie... and to be honest, I'm not looking forward to the next death. I don't want to become like what happened to my parents and Sirius... but I honestly don't know how much more it would take before I'd be at that edge."

The image of Wilson's flaming body rose to the forefront in Tonks' mind, and she winced as she drove it back down. It was self-defense, that one, she thought firmly, but in her gut, she still felt sick...

"And it's not just that."

Tonks blinked. "Harry, if you're taking everything Snape said seriously –"

"I'm taking it with a grain of salt, obviously," Harry said quickly, "but there's something that he said that made me start thinking."

"About what?"

Harry's grip on her hand tightened. "How no matter how hard I try, I can't remember the night I left my relatives' house."

She frowned – she hadn't expected that. "You can't expect to remember everything –"

"No, this is different, events like that should be seared in my memory," Harry said, his voice certain as he raked a hand through his hair, making it even messier, "I should remember every second of that night... but I just can't. It's just flashes and faces... nothing substantial."

Subconsciously, her hair shortened dramatically and went a brilliant magenta. "Do you think somebody's messed with your memories?" she asked seriously.

"Tonks, I have no idea," Harry answered honestly. "I just don't know. It's just... worrying. I don't know if I just blocked it out, or whether simulamancy's been screwing with my mind..."

Tonks shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, about that..." I need to say something – I've kept things from him for far too long. "Harry, I'm not sure we should use simulamancy anymore."

"Huh?" Harry asked, startled. "What's wrong?"

Tonks closed her eyes, trying to put together her thoughts – and struggling every step of the way. "I... I just don't know, Harry. The first simulacrum, things were fine, but when we tried the second... I think one of the rituals went wrong."

"But if a ritual went wrong, shouldn't we both be dead?" Harry asked, scratching his temple. "From what we've found out about this magic, if we make any mistakes, we're dead instantly."

"I don't think we screwed up," Tonks said, her voice very quiet. "And that's what scares the hell out of me. I... I'm not sure a third time is a good idea."

"Tonks, the reason we went after the Potter Vaults is because we need the money for the ritual," Harry said, trying not to sound frustrated, "so we can track down the damn ghosts inside Hogwarts with those visions I get... and now you want to stop?"

"Harry, please, don't be like that," Tonks said, swallowing hard. "We should probably go up to Hogwarts at some point anyways, maybe Moody's found some new information –"

"Hasn't had any luck so far," Harry muttered morosely.

"So, what? You're ready to do this ritual, then?" Tonks snapped, her voice harshening. "You ready to kill again? Got a target in mind?"

There were a long few seconds of silence, and then –

"Think we need some sleep," Harry murmured. "We're both on edge."

"Last time I managed to get some sleep was..." She glanced at Harry and gave him a knowing look. "Well, you know."

"Are you saying... are you saying you want to do it again?" Harry asked, unable to prevent the hopeful tones in his voice.

Tonks chuckled. "Horny little bugger."

"Hey, you probably want it just as bad –"

"Hope your technique's gotten a little better," Tonks mused, a sly grin creeping across her face, "otherwise I might have to satisfy my own wants."

Harry reddened a bit, but he reached into his cloak and produced his blanket. "Well, we have time now."

Tonks raised both of her eyebrows now. "Really, outside? In this weather?"

"That's what Warming Charms are for," Harry replied fairly. "The snow's pretty soft, though – and I bet it would be a lot of fun."

Tonks considered that. "Probably," she said slowly, "and I could cross it off my list."

Harry froze. "You have a list?"

Tonks winked at him as she began untying her cloak. "Intimidating?"

"As long as I get to help," Harry said with a smile, "I'm game."

"Careful what you sign up for, Mr. Potter," Tonks said wryly. "And trust me when I say it might be a bit more than what you've bargained for."

"So after I found Black's autobiography and I knew that something struck as me as odd on the second read-through –"

"Hermione," Ron interrupted, putting a hand to his head to thwart off the rising ache as he shovelled sausages onto his plate, "I can really appreciate your enthusiasm, but I didn't sleep at all last night, and I just really wish that you'd be quiet for just a few minutes so I can eat and hopefully stave off the hammer that's pounding against my skull."

Hermione's face fell slightly, but her eyes immediately lit up when she saw Neville sit down opposite them. Run, man, Ron thought sympathetically, while you still can...

"Sorry, Hermione, I think you already told me the story last night," Neville said hastily, raising his hands. "I just want to ask Ron something."

Hermione huffed. "This could actually mean something, likely tying into the reasons why none of us have been able to sleep."

"Hasn't stopped you," Ron muttered, giving her a weak smile as she glared at him.

"It's about... you know." Neville shifted uncomfortably, glancing at Hermione. "You think we should, with –"

"What are you two talking about?" Hermione asked, her eyes lighting up. "Is it plans for the hunt for Black's tomb? Do you have any ideas of what we might need, because I started putting together a list –"

"Why don't you go to the library and refine that list, then?" Ron said tiredly, taking a bite of his sausage. "It's the weekend anyways, and you're on top of your homework..."

"Well, aren't you going to come?" Hermione pursued.

Ron put two fingers to each of his temples and forced down his frustration – and the effort only made his headache worse. "I'll... I'll be there soon, okay?" he replied, taking a deep breath. Dear Merlin, I think the pounding's only getting worse...

As Hermione sped out of the room, Neville gave him a consoling look. "I don't think she means to be so grating."

"She's just... intense," Ron muttered, popping the rest of his sausage into his mouth. "And I think the lack of sleep is just making it worse. So what's going on?"

Neville shifted. "I... I want to start training again."

Ron took a deep breath – he had somewhat expected this. "You talked to my brothers about this?"

"They told me they're busy," Neville said hesitantly, "but they said if you were willing to start it up again with the list, they'd help."

Ron didn't exactly know what to say to that. He chewed on his sausage as he tried to think. From what Harry keeps telling me, I'm not ready for this... but I need to do something...

"When do you want to start?" he asked, washing down the sausage with a swig of orange juice.

"Sooner rather than later," Neville said quietly. "I get the feeling that if Hermione really did find something, Hogwarts might be in a lot of trouble soon – oh hey, Hermione, back already?"

"Didn't even get there," Hermione replied, sitting down next to Neville, a strange frown on her face. Strange... where did all of that manic energy go? Ron thought as he continued eating. Does that mean she's going to start having mood swings...

"So what's going on?"

"I ran into Ernie in the Entrance Hall," Hermione replied, fiddling with the ends of her hair, "and he invited me to a 'meditation session' in the Astronomy Tower."

Of all of the things Ron had expected to hear, that was not one of them. "A meditation session? What?"

"He said it might help me relax, maybe get some sleep," Hermione said slowly, "and he said he wanted me to be there because he's found some new magical techniques in the library that might be able to help."

"And he invited us?" Ron continued, relief creeping into his voice, his headache even beginning to feel a bit better at the good news. Maybe I can get some bloody sleep... "That's great, what time –"

"No, Ron," Hermione cut him off, her frown deepening. "He only invited me."

And in a second, the headache came rushing back, and Ron could hardly restrain a groan. "Well, that's not fair – if he found something

that can help us sleep and rid me off this damned headache, I want in!"

"Ron, I don't know about this – Ron, don't get up, Ron –"

"Oy, Ernie!" Ron called, spotting the Hufflepuff entering the Great Hall. "Talk for a second?"

Ernie turned from his conversation with Hannah and smiled. "Ah, Ron, I haven't seen you in a while –"

"What's all this rubbish about you having some 'meditation session'?" Ron interrupted brusquely, ignoring Hannah's disapproving scowl and Hermione's exasperated look. "Why can't I come?"

Ernie sighed. "Ron, if I had my way, you and Neville would be on my list – after Zacharias and Justin, obviously, got to look out for fellow Hufflepuffs – but from what I've read about the magic, it only been known to work with witches. If I had something that would work with a wizard, I'd offer it to you –"

"Why does it only work with witches?" Ron demanded. "That doesn't make much sense –"

"Magic doesn't always tend to make a lot of sense, Ron!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Come on, let's go –"

"Well, can I watch?" Ron asked suspiciously.

Ernie gave him another apologetic look. "Sorry, but even I can't watch this once I get the magic started for the meditation. "Look, I swear on my family that I know what I'm doing, okay? Besides, it's meditation – it can't hurt anyone."

And with that (and a glare from Hannah), Ernie slipped past Ron and headed towards the Hufflepuff table.

"Hermione," Neville asked timidly, "are you going to go to this?"

"Well," Hermione replied, shifting guiltily, "I am pretty tired, and Moody did tell me to get some sleep –"

"Something doesn't feel right," Ron muttered. "Look, Hermione, I don't think this is safe –"

"You probably don't even know what meditation is!" Hermione exclaimed with frustration. "Honestly, what's the big deal?"

"I do know what meditation is!" Ron retorted, "But come on, Hermione, this just seems fishy! Why does Ernie need magic for meditation? It's weird, that's what it is."

"Ron, it's Ernie," Neville said, a bewildered expression on his face. "I mean, if it was Malfoy, I'd understand, but Ernie's a decent guy. There shouldn't be any problems..."

"Exactly," Hermione said firmly. "Ron, I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine – and besides, Ernie's inviting a bunch of other girls too, and I'm sure we'd be able to handle him."

Ron shook his head. "I dunno... he didn't expose Malfoy and the rest of them like he said he would –"

"I'll ask him about it, okay?" Hermione reassured him. "Now, let's go to the library – we still have a lot of work to –"

Ron put his hand to his forehead. "Just... just go, Hermione. I think I might get down to the Hospital Wing. This headache's only getting worse."

"You sound a bit like Harry used to," Hermione said, her smile fading somewhat. "When he kept talking about his scar..." Her voice trailed off and she glanced down at her watch. "Oh, shoot – look, Ron, I'll teach you the meditation when I'm done, but I've got to get to the library and get this research done –"

She dashed away. Ron closed his eyes against the pounding in his head and tried to think.

"Neville, tell me I'm not crazy." He turned and gave his friend a frank expression. "Tell me something sounds wrong about this."

Neville shifted. "Well, I guess we can go see Professor Moody – he could help."

Ron took a deep breath, fighting to keep coherent thought against the pounding in his skull. God, I need sleep... "Okay, we'll finish breakfast, and then find Moody. And providing he doesn't curse us through his door, we might be able to get his help."

Malfoy watched intently as Weasley and Longbottom went back into the Great Hall.

"I guess Macmillian has actually started doing something," Zabini said idly, scanning through the Daily Prophet as he leaned against the wall. "About time, if you'd ask me."

"I'm still not sure I like this plan, Blaise," Malfoy growled. "Granted, we don't know what Macmillian's going to do, but I do know what spirits we're using."

"And..."

"Blaise, don't be stupid!" Malfoy hissed furiously, rounding on his ally. "You know what those spirits did to Hogwarts! You know what they did –"

Zabini shut his paper with irritation. "Yes, Draco, I know, but what else were we supposed to do? There weren't exactly many options when it came to Hufflepuff!"

Malfoy gritted his teeth. The previous attacks had mildly unsettled his stomach, but this? This was glorification of something that he could not stand –

"I trust that Daphne and Tracey know what they're doing, if that's who you're concerned about," Zabini continued, scanning the back page of his paper.

Malfoy paused. He hadn't heard that correctly – he couldn't have.

"Did I just hear you say," he began quietly, "that Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis are going to Macmillian's little 'meditation' too?"

"Daphne's only going because of Tracey agreed to it," Zabini replied irritably, folding up his paper. "And I'm certain Daphne will prevent anything from happening to her –"

"They are purebloods," Malfoy hissed, putting emphasis on every word as his stomach began to roil with rage. "They are Slytherins – they are not targets!"

Zabini snorted. "Malfoy, stop whining – you knew we'd lose Slytherins eventually. At least we're only losing two that aren't particularly useful."

"Aren't particularly – are you listening to yourself?" Malfoy exclaimed, his eyes widening with anger, his hands balling into fists. "You know what methods will be used here – you know what Macmillian will do – and you have the temerity to suggest that they are a necessary sacrifice, that they deserve what is coming –"

"Actually, I really just don't care," Zabini replied with a snort. "If they're going to be idiots and associate outside the house with Mudbloods and Hufflepuffs, they aren't worth either of our time." He shrugged. "I've got better things to think about."

"Such as –"

Malfoy's words were drowned out by an unpleasant sound – the unmistakable sound of vomit hitting the floor.

Zabini clenched his teeth and he turned to the origin of the sound. "Namely, that."

Malfoy swallowed back his breakfast as he saw where Theodore Nott was kneeling in the puddle of his own sick, flecked with blood – and if possible, he looked even worse. His filthy robes were hanging off his wasted form, and his eyes were rolling in their sockets with madness.

Malfoy fought the urge to take a safe step back. This wasn't the drooling madness that afflicted the mentally ill or the giggling madness of some driven beyond the brink by the Cruciatus Curse. No, this insanity was the same he saw every time he looked into his aunt Bellatrix's eyes, the kind where you were never sure whether cackling insanity or terrifying, evil lucidity was coming.

And Malfoy suspected it was permanent.

"You look bloody awful," Zabini said with distaste. "And I thought I told you it wasn't safe to leave the dormitories."

Nott didn't answer. Instead, he extended a wasted hand and looked straight at Malfoy, his eyes glittering.

"A hand, Draco?"

Malfoy couldn't respond – he only could stare transfixed at the hand covered in vomit and blood, although it didn't seem like Nott realized it or cared –

"You are covered in your own filth and your own sick," Zabini said, supreme contempt in his voice as he strode forward, smacking Nott's upraised arm aside. "And furthermore, you are blowing your cover. Get up!"

Nott bared his teeth, his expression feral. "Make me, Blaise –"

Zabini's eyes narrowed – and then without a word, he kicked the kneeling Nott in the face.

More blood spilled from Nott's mouth, but Zabini didn't seem to care. Reaching down, he seized Nott's filth-encrusted robes by the front, heaved him up, and slammed him against the stone wall. Malfoy took the opportunity to quietly Vanish the reeking puddle of vomit and with a wave of his wand, drove the stench away.

Nott's eyes blazed with hatred. "You dare to lay your hands –"

"The Dark Lord," Zabini growled, "will personally dissect you if you fail in his task – and despite your remarkable coherence, which I will attitude to the fact you've lost your mind completely, I have no doubt Moody and McGonagall will reduce you to a drooling husk if you blow your cover. Now you will get back to the dormitory, and you will stay there – am I quite clear?"

"I have –"

"Did I make myself fucking clear, Nott?"

"I have orders, Blaise," Nott spat, yanking himself out of Zabini's grip and spitting blood onto the floor. "Orders from the Dark Lord."

Malfoy's eyes went wide. "We're in a public place –"

"Nobody's around, hush," Nott hissed, shockingly coherent as he pulled a filthy letter from a pocket of his robes. "We have a new mission, and we need two things to make it work."

He brandished the letter. Zabini, taking the letter disgustedly with the tips of his fingers, and began to read. Malfoy looked for a long five seconds, the bad feeling in his stomach getting worse and worse, and then –

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

Zabini crushed the paper in his palm. "It's..." he said through gritted teeth. "Well, it's doable."

"We just watched her," Malfoy snarled, "say that she was going to go to Macmillian's bloody gathering. Now what the hell are we going to do?"

"We have to get her out," Zabini said, beginning to pace, "but we have to make it look accidental. Nobody must know it happened. Nott... Nott, where the hell are you going?"

The Slytherin turned from his drifting stroll and smiled sweetly at Zabini and Malfoy – made all the more gut-wrenching coming from bloody teeth. "Back to the dormitory, as you said, of course."

Zabini growled with frustration as he drew his wand. "Okay, we know where the attack will be – can't believe we're rescuing a bloody Mudblood – and... oh, for the sake of the Dark Lord, Draco, what's wrong now?"

"You did read the rest of the letter, right?" Malfoy asked, and even he was a bit surprised how quiet his voice was.

"I did," Zabini replied dispassionately. "And?"

"I..." Malfoy took a shuddering breath, forcing back the images his too-vivid imagination already brought to mind. I didn't think we'd be... we'd allow... this isn't clean, this is sick...

He knew what he had done, and hadn't had much of a problem with things. After all, the Ravenclaw girls inflicted their torture on themselves, and he had always thought Filch was a child molester regardless of his possession. And the Lovegood girl was already insane, we were just accentuating it with the two spirits, and even though what Macmillian is doing is just wrong on every level, with the right push we can stop him...

But this was different. This was very different.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. He'd have time to brood about it later – Macmillian was on the move, and they were all running low on time. And Nott's running low on sanity.

"Never mind, let's move."

The hourglasses that had always accorded house points had always been placed in the Entrance Hall, between the great doors leading to the grounds and the doors of the Great Hall. Most of the time, the raised dais where they stood was a decent place for students to sit and study if they were looking for a place to loiter.

But right now, in the sleep-deprived fog that had enveloped the entire school, the majority of the students didn't even care about house points, much less the hourglasses, and a hard stone dais was hardly as comfortable as an inviting armchair in a dormitory. And thus the hourglasses went ignored.

And thus nobody noticed Fred and George Weasley pull off their Invisibility Cloaks, identical cold smiles on their faces.

"Got all that, brother?"

"Enough evidence for Moody to turn Nott, Zabini, and Malfoy into mincemeat?" George replied, rubbing his hands together. "Yep."

"We'll still need to get Moody involved," Fred said calmly, tucking the Invisibility Cloak he was using into his bag. "We don't know where Ernie's holding the ritual, and Moody'll be a damn sight faster catching him."

"And then we take all three of them down," George finished, cracking his knuckles. "Let's move."

Harry stared at the empty bed where they had left Claudius Kemester, and sighed bitterly. So much for that chance...

"So you just told him," Sirius asked disbelievingly, "that I was here?"

Aberforth rolled his eyes. "Yes. And then he saw his father, they had their little moment, and I let him leave with his father's body – and frankly, I don't see much wrong with that."

"Much wrong with... Aberforth, they're going to put this bar on surveillance!" Sirius exclaimed, the last remnant of his Knotgrass high fading from his eyes. "You're lucky you didn't get arrested yourself. He's probably loaded the place with booby traps and –"

"The place is mostly clear, Sirius," Tonks said irritably, looking up from where she was looking under the table, her hair still untidy. "Just a few eavesdropping spells, easy enough to take – ow!"

Harry glanced over, to see Tonks massaging her scalp as she toppled out from beneath the table.

"You might want to be careful," Lupin said with bemusement as he placed his coat on a hook. "Tables are known to be very dangerous foes – almost on the level of umbrella stands."

Tonks glared at Lupin. "I'll have you know – Harry, stop laughing!"

"And you just trust him because you gave him time with his dying father and you think he'll respect that?" Sirius demanded. "Aberforth, I hate to be rude, but do you know this son-of-a-bitch?"

"Probably better than you do, Sirius," Aberforth replied stonily, crossing his arms over his chest. "Don't get me wrong, he will be back, but it won't be soon. We have some time."

Sirius took a frustrated breath and sat down in the nearest armchair in the overcrowded kitchen. "Bloody wonderful. Maybe I should just leave the country – Merlin knows I need a vacation..."

"Yeah, keep telling that story to the man under Imperius the last few months," Lupin replied mildly. "Oh, don't apologize, Sirius, I was careless to get myself caught – won't make that mistake again."

Harry shook his head as he sat down in a chair next to Tonks. He looked at Lupin, his thoughts a confusing snarl. I honestly don't know how I feel about him, he thought to himself, settling into his chair. I mean, I'm fairly certain he regrets everything that happened before... and he's already apologized... but can I trust him?

"Harry," Tonks murmured, nudging him playfully in the ribs, "I know the sex was terrific and you were a lot better, but you need to make a decision."

"Right," Harry said quietly, turning to look at Lupin.

The werewolf's open, honest expression wasn't helping Harry's decision-making process.

"Professor," Harry began slowly.

"Call me Remus, Harry," Lupin said calmly.

"Right," Harry said uncomfortably. "Look, I'm not entirely sure how to approach this – I mean, the last time we had anything close to a conversation, neither of us was behaving particularly... uh, well."

Aberforth, who had begun wiping dishes by the sink, snorted with mock disbelief.

Lupin winced. "Harry, you were right to be angry at me."

"Yeah..." Harry took a quick swig of his water and then set the glass down with a very audible clunk. "Let's be honest... Remus, I don't even think the last time we talked, I was really angry at you. I was angrier at Dumbledore – not you, Aberforth, your brother –"

"It doesn't surprise me," Aberforth growled. "Go on."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not really sure what was running through my head last August," Harry admitted, raking a hand through his untidy hair and moving it another step towards completely dishevelled. "So much was happening so fast, and I didn't know who I could trust... and now here we are, over five months later." He glanced over at Aberforth. "And Dumbledore's not even here." He looked back at Lupin. "And now everything's out in the open."

"Harry –"

"I know how sorry you are, and to be honest, Remus, I really don't want to hear you apologize," Harry said, a small note of irritation leaking through the conflicting emotions in his voice. "I just... look, you were one of my dad's closest friends, and I don't want to hate you." Harry sighed with frustration. "It's confusing, you know?"

"Understatement of the century," Tonks muttered.

"I guess what I'm trying to get out is, well, a bit of an apology," Harry finished simply, meeting Lupin's dark eyes. "I saw what happened

to... to my mum and Sirius and Cassane – and I've got to think that if I don't want to go down that road, I don't want to be... well, like I was last August." He shook his head. "You don't make friends that way – not the friends you want to keep."

He drained the rest of his water with a single long gulp. "You know, the more I think about it, the more things just didn't make sense – I mean, you had more to lose than I did then."

Lupin closed his eyes. "Yeah," he said quietly, "although I will admit calling in Snape after you and Tonks broke into Gringotts wasn't the smartest decision I've ever made."

"Understatement of the century, you have new competition!" Sirius muttered. "In this corner – ow, Remus!"

"I would hope, Harry," Lupin continued, a strange mixture of relief and bitterness on his face, withdrawing his elbow from Sirius' side, "that eventually things could go back to the way they were between us."

"That's probably not going to happen, Remus," Harry replied evenly. "But," he added, "I wouldn't say no to them getting better than that." He extended his hand. "I'm sorry, Remus – friends?"

Lupin took a shuddering breath, but a grin finally broke on his face as he took Harry's hand. "Friends. And I'm sorry as well... for not saying –"

"I know," Harry replied, a smile crossing his own face.

"So Tonks, I may now have to buy you a drink," Lupin said after a few seconds of peaceful silence, glancing at her and winking. "After all, I'm assuming you had something to do with this."

"Hey, is it so hard to believe that I came to this because I actually had a genuine revelation?" Harry said indignantly.

Sirius smirked. Aberforth snorted. Lupin gave Harry a knowing look. And Tonks just chuckled, her hair going neon green.

"Well, you all suck," Harry muttered.

"Well, joking aside," Sirius said, rising from the table and taking the pitcher of water from the counter, "we do have a considerable amount of work left. Now that we know about the Potter Vaults, you should at least get into Gringotts and retrieve the money. I'm sure they've got all the paperwork that he needs."

"That's assuming the goblins cooperate," Tonks said cautiously, taking the pitcher from Sirius and refilling her own glass. "After what we've done... well, it would have been better if we knew where Fleur was."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, I nearly forgot about her – the last time I ran into her was at Cassane's house, a couple months ago, before the Ministry attacks. I got the impression from Cassane that he was going to try and get her out of the country, but judging by what Kemester and Rita Skeeter said in *Magical Finance*, she hasn't left – so where is she?"

"Might not be a bad idea to meet with Cassane again," Sirius suggested with a helpless shrug. "I mean... well, even despite what we've seen, he's stable now, and he's only helped us."

Tonks' hair darkened a few shades as she thought. "And we still need to find a way to help things at Hogwarts. Despite how much of a bastard Snape was, he had a point – we need to find out whatever's causing those attacks." She glanced at Sirius. "You've already brought Remus up to speed –"

"For the most part," Lupin replied calmly, "but I think I can follow as you go along."

"Good," Tonks said, sliding her chair to a nearby armoire and swiping a quill and parchment from the top. "Okay, so we have Hogwarts – priority number one, I don't think there's any argument there. Now, Alastor's already got those ghost-projecting things that Cassane gave us, but we still need to find the root of the problem before the time distortion gets any worse."

Harry groaned with frustration. "A lot easier if we weren't losing days or weeks at a time when we're at Hogwarts."

Tonks exhaled slowly. "Pretty much. Priority number two is dealing with the Potter Vaults. That could mean finding Fleur or going to the goblins directly. Either way, it's a priority."

"I think priority three needs to deal with the Order," Sirius spoke up, his eyes narrowed in thought. "With Dumbledore and Snape gone, we don't have a damn clue what Voldemort's up to – and he's been awfully quiet after Azkaban."

"Well, who knows how much of his forces he got out of there?" Harry asked, raising a hand. "I mean, it's Voldemort, so I'm assuming he got most of them, but he's bound to have taken some losses."

"I'm not counting on it," Tonks said grimly, her quill scratching against the parchment as her hair went navy. "Fourth is the Ministry – and let me be honest here, guys, if I don't get into work sometime in the next couple of days, I'm going to be out of a job."

"Can't you just explain to Kingsley –"

"Would work, except Kingsley's not my boss, Sirius," Tonks replied tersely. "That's Scrimgeour, and he's not going to be nearly as lenient."

"But wait," Harry argued, "doesn't he know you're on investigations that are, in the long-run, dedicated to defeating Voldemort? I mean, from what you've told me, he believes Voldemort's back –"

"If that was official Ministry policy," Tonks replied tiredly, running a hand through her hair, "it would be a hell of a lot easier – but it's not. Fudge still isn't buying any of it, as far as I know – or if he is, he's biding his time until he can make an announcement that's advantageous to him, slick bastard that he is."

Harry grimaced. "So we're stuck –"

"And I still need to follow up and track down the other traitor in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Tonks continued, real exasperation creeping into her voice, "because I know Kemester's not going to forget about that, and if I don't want to get arrested, I'm going to have to come up with something. I think Sirius is right – we do need a vacation."

Sirius smirked. "Told you."

Lupin, however, frowned. "Is it possible," he began speculatively, "that Kemester is the traitor and he's sending Tonks on a wild goose chase to throw off his trail?"

"Kemester's not a pleasant man," Aberforth spoke up, his voice dry, "I will admit that, but he's too proud and he's not subtle. He's not a spy. Spies blend into the background – and Kemester does anything but that."

Lupin shrugged. "Just a suggestion."

"Let's jump to a different topic for a second," Harry said, adjusting his glasses. "Tonks, when we went into Azkaban, you got that guy Podmore out, right?"

Tonks stiffened slightly, and her hair nearly went black as she took a deep breath, as if she was remembering something she really didn't want to remember. "Yeah... wait a second –"

"He was in Azkaban for killing that Unspeakable," Sirius said slowly, recognition dawning on his face.

"And apparently on Dumbledore's orders," Harry finished. He glanced at Aberforth. "Not yours, obviously –"

"I'm not surprised, Potter," Aberforth said darkly. "Go on, you don't need to keep clarifying whether it was me or Albus."

"Regardless," Tonks said, raising a finger, "none of us asked him why. I haven't even seen him since we busted him out of Azkaban!"

Lupin scratched his unshaven jaw. "I might be able to find him if he's gone to ground – and I'd probably be more inconspicuous too. And I don't think he'd have a reason not to trust me –"

There was a clatter at the window, nearly catching everyone by surprise. Aberforth only made a huffing noise and stumped over to the window, flipping it open to reveal a large barn owl, with a very thick envelope tied to its leg.

"Post is in," Sirius said drily, twisting his chair to watch as Aberforth pulled the message free. "Anything interesting?"

Aberforth snorted. "Yeah, you might think so." He tossed the envelope on the table. "Though I dunno why they're sending my 'lawyer's' mail here..."

Tonks snatched the envelope quickly – a little too quickly. "Uh, I think we can handle this – Aberforth, can you go downstairs, please?"

"This something I should know?" Aberforth asked suspiciously, his eyes fixed on the envelope with an intensity that Harry found a little unnerving. He's starting to put things together, by the looks of things...

"Nothing we can't handle," he said carefully, his eyes moving from Tonks to Aberforth. "Please?"

Aberforth snorted. "Whatever. Might as well wish you good luck – I get the feeling from the seals on the envelope that you might need it." With that, he left the room, his boots heavy on the creaking stairs as he descended to the bar.

Sirius hastily shut the door behind him. "What seals, Tonks?"

Tonks quickly flipped the envelope over, to reveal two wax seals: one with the words 'Daily Prophet' stamped on it, and the other a top-down view of the world, crossed by a vertical wand with three stars spraying from its tip.

"I don't recognize that seal," Harry said uneasily.

"I do," Tonks said quietly, her face going pale along with her hair. "It's the seal of the International Confederation of Wizards, and the letter's addressed to 'Clarissa Desdame & Nymphadora Vuneren'." She looked up at Harry. "We... we might be in trouble."

It is drawing near.

I only needed to speak the words, and their tired souls came towards the light. Even if they do not know their souls thirst for righteousness, goodness, and cleansing from the filth around us.

They seek a reprieve.

And as before, I am the good shepherd, and there will be nothing they shall want. They will be led to lie in greener pastures...

And they shall dwell the house of the Lord, the last day of their lives.

Harry could hardly believe what he was reading.

"Let me begin," Sirius began in a measured voice, "by stating my extremely professional and well-researched opinion: this is a trap."

"They can't think we're this stupid," Tonks murmured, shaking her head with disbelief. "They can't bloody believe that."

"On behalf of the Ministry of Magic and the Daily Prophet, we formally request your presence at a full extended session of the International Confederation of Wizards," Harry read aloud, his eyes scanning the flamboyant purple script covering the official-looking piece of parchment. "Given your firm's involvement in the cases of Sirius Black and Harry Potter, we require testimony from Desdame & Vuneren in order to assess the threat now facing wizarding Britain." Harry looked up from the paper. "This has to be about the Azkaban breakout, it has to be. It's one of the biggest wizarding prisons in the world, and with that many criminals freed –"

"But why would they invite you two?" Sirius said with growing confusion. "I mean, this is the most obvious trap I've ever seen in my

life to lure you two out into the public eye – it just doesn't make any goddamn sense why they would even bother!"

"Maybe I'm not following all of this," Lupin spoke up, a frown creasing his face, "but why exactly are we convinced this is a trap?"

"Because 'Desdame & Vuneren' doesn't exactly exist, Remus," Tonks replied nervously, her hair flashing bright orange before fading to a muted mauve. "The slick lawyer act only holds up for so long."

"The meetings will be held at the new Bonaccord Hall in Westminster on February 9th, 1996, beginning at ten o'clock," Harry continued to read aloud. "We advise an arrival one hour early for check-in and pictures. Accommodations and dining will be covered by the Ministry. Signed, Barnabus Cuffe, Editor-In-Chief of the Daily Prophet." He tossed the invitation down on the table and snorted. "I can't believe this."

"What's the Bonaccord Hall?" Sirius asked, picking up the letter and scanning it. "That sounds pretty new –"

"That's because it is," Tonks replied with a snort. "When Fudge's support soared after the Diagon Alley bombings, donations poured in for the reconstruction of the Ministry, but the International Confederation of Wizards was a little wary about setting up shop in our main offices again. So they commissioned a new site with the excess donor money that they weren't hoarding because of the goblin hostility." She shrugged. "It's been kept pretty quiet – this might be the first time the building's ever been used, actually."

Lupin sighed as he accepted the letter from Sirius. "A terrible trap, but unfortunately, we might not be able to avoid this one."

"Sure we can," Sirius retorted promptly. "Tonks and Harry don't show up."

"And then what?" Lupin returned exasperatedly. "If you don't show, you effectively affirm your guilt to the Ministry."

"There is such a thing as lawyer-client privilege, Remus –"

"You honestly think the Ministry gives a hippogriff's hind end about that?" Sirius replied with disgust. "Okay, so maybe it's a better trap than we thought."

"Except we have Cassane on our side," Harry said slowly, glancing at Sirius. "Publicly, given that article he ran a few months ago – and I'm sure he'd interfere if the Ministry attempted to pull a fast one on us."

"And then get promptly stripped of all his powers," Sirius finished, shaking his head. "They did it to Dumbledore –"

"With the goblins as volatile as they are?" Tonks countered. "I doubt that. But you do have a point – Cassane is limited in what he can do."

"Well, if we're going to coordinate something with him, we should send him a message or something –"

And almost as if Harry's words had summoned it magically, a second owl, this one only slightly larger than Pigwidgeon, zoomed through the window, tossing a crumpled ball of paper it had been holding in its talons on the table before zooming straight out again.

"Speak of the devil," Sirius muttered. "Twenty Galleons it's from Cassane."

"Yeah, nobody's taking that bet," Harry replied, unfolding the letter and beginning to read aloud.

Harry & Tonks,

By now I suspect you have received the invitation from the International Confederation of Wizards for a meeting in Westminster. Contrary to any thoughts you might have had, this was not my idea.

Sirius snorted. "Hadn't even considered that."

In fact, this is a meeting orchestrated by the Minister for Magic – he's been quiet after the Azkaban attacks for too long, and this, I suspect, is his big move. As of right now, my people in Fudge's office have not

been able to discover what he plans to say at this meeting – and it could be anything. It could even be an announcement that Voldemort has returned for all we know.

Harry paused, and then looked up at Tonks. "Do you think... do you think he would?"

Lupin frowned. "It would be a strange move, and not a particularly popular one, given his repeated denials of it, but most people aren't that stupid, and they are bound to start asking questions. I would argue that it's a possibility."

"Thanks, Tonks," Sirius said with a grin. Lupin sighed.

"Pretty much what Remus said," Tonks finally said with a sigh, her hair shifting to an emerald shade. "I could see Fudge doing it. Keep reading, Harry."

On the other hand, Fudge could continue doing what he has done for the past months: denounce that Voldemort has returned; continue to slander Dumbledore's name; and if Umbridge is involved, even accuse you two of collaborating with 'the enemy', now 'uniting under Sirius Black's banner.' In this case, you could well be in great danger.

Sirius actually chuckled a bit at this. "Yeah, if Fudge says that, I will laugh my ass off. I mean, does he even know –"

"Unfortunately, he doesn't," Tonks replied seriously, "and that's always been the problem – Fudge either doesn't know or refuses to listen."

But regardless of Fudge's plans, there will be Death Eaters infiltrating this event, regardless of the high Auror security (sidenote – Tonks, you may have a very tricky time balancing a double role, and I suspect you've long exhausted your vacation and sick days; concoct some sort of deep cover assignment and fast). Granted, we do have the welcome absence of Lucius Malfoy, but there will still be others looking to cause trouble. So regardless of what Fudge might say, you will remain in danger.

However, this is an opportunity that I believe we must now exploit: to inform the world that without a doubt, Lord Voldemort has returned. I will be able to deliver a speech to this effect, and with the ample amount of evidence I'm sure you'll be able to accrue (basically the package you gave to Paulus Amoccio a few months ago contains the majority of what you need – recreate that with the events of Azkaban accounted for and we should be fine), we should have no trouble convincing the Confederation of the truth.

I will plan to meet with you at seven thirty on the ninth at the entrance of the Hall. Come prepared for combat and possibly an overnight – the Hall has rooms set aside for it, and given the magnitude of this event and how much the Confederation loves posturing, it could drag on for a few days over the weekend.

Burn this after reading.

-N.C.

PS – Come prepared for the luncheons. I do not exaggerate when I say they may be the most horrifyingly dangerous five hours you might ever experience.

With a tap of her wand, Tonks incinerated the paper, and then looked up at the group. "So?"

Sirius let out a long breath. "That building is going to be crawling with security from dozens of nations, plus a full contingent of Aurors – it's a fact, I'm not going to be able to provide support like at the Department of Magical Finance that you'll be able to ignore."

"Are you really still bummed about our lack of an escape there?" Harry asked sympathetically.

"I did all of that spellwork," Sirius said disappointedly. "All of that work, all of those calculations, and you two don't even bother to test it out by leaping out the windows and sliding down a chute of magic. Talk about a bloody waste of time."

"We still run into the same problem that we ran into before," Harry said tersely, "back when they were planning that interrogation for me at Hogwarts – namely that people can twist anything we say and spin it so we look guilty, even if we're telling the truth." He clenched his fist. "Either that or we're just branded as mad. Even if we tell the truth on this, nobody will report or see it that way, or even take me at my word."

"I suspect, though," Lupin said slowly, "that we may be presuming a bit more bias than what is truly there this time. While Harry is world-famous for surviving the Killing Curse and defeating Voldemort, the Ministry hasn't exactly been able to slander Harry on a world stage."

"And no offense to Dumbledore, wherever he is," Sirius added, his eyes lighting up, "but he wouldn't have had nearly the same sway in the interrogation as Cassane will at this meeting. Cassane's well-liked, charismatic, and he's the Supreme Mugwump – that's an advantage we can't exactly disregard."

"And that doesn't include the fact that the British Ministry's spent the last few months embarrassing itself," Tonks finished, shaking her head. "Actually, scratch that – probably the past few years. Sirius breaking out of Azkaban, the Quidditch World Cup, Cedric Diggory's death at the Triwizard Tournament –"

"Break-in at Gringotts," Sirius continued, ticking the incidents off on his fingers as he spoke, "the destruction of Ollivanders, the bombing of the Ministry, nearly starting another international goblin rebellion with the whole new bank fiasco, and to top it off, Azkaban." Sirius winced. "And somehow, Fudge is still Minister. Merlin, our country is fucked up."

"So, to summarize," Harry asked, a small smile growing on his face, "the Ministry have made big enough fools of themselves that they can't stop us?"

"I wouldn't say that –" Lupin began cautiously.

"I would," Sirius muttered.

"– But it does render the circumstances favourable," Lupin continued, giving Sirius a stern look. "Better than they'll probably ever be."

Harry took a deep breath. "All right, I'll send a message back to Cassane saying we'll be there, but it's still January. We still need to work on our other priorities, namely dealing with the ghosts at Hogwarts." He glanced through the window at the castle in the distance. "And I should probably get back up to the school and talk to Moody, see if he's put together a plan or something."

Tonks smirked, her hair going blood-red. "Knowing him, I reckon he's got about six by now, and I bet at least one is close. Dumbledore brought him in for a good reason, and I wouldn't want to get in his way."

"New orders have come in," Larshall said briskly as he stepped into Kemester's cubicle, a sealed purple package in his hand. He wrinkled his nose. "You don't look so good."

"Rough night," Kemester muttered, taking the package and slitting it open. "Mind giving me the notes?"

"You and I are part of the security detail for the Confederation summit at Bonaccord Hall," Larshall replied, leaning against the cubicle wall as Kemester began scanning the papers within. "Apparently, Fudge is expecting someone to attack."

Kemester snorted. "Yeah, I'm not surprised. Doubt anyone will bother, though."

"It would make sense, nearly every Auror or Hit Wizard's been pulled off their investigations for a shift here – if a certain someone is trying to wipe us out all at once along with the heart of the Ministry –"

"Yeah, You-Know-Who isn't stupid enough to risk an international incident," Kemester interrupted curtly. "Hear from Skeeter at all?"

"Apparently, they went to a Muggle hotel across the street from the Department of Magical Finance and then just disappeared," Larshall

replied helplessly. "They probably Disapparated, she reckons, and she didn't have a chance to nail them with Tracking Charms."

Kemester snorted with disgust. "So, in other words, she was completely useless."

"Not quite," Larshall replied, a small grin appearing on his face. "She managed to get her hands on Laertes Rawlings' old paperwork and possessions, and she's having them sent here."

Kemester sat up abruptly. "To the Ministry? Is she out of her bloody mind? She could expose something –"

"Not to the evidence files," Larshall replied, his grin getting wider. "To us, directly, so we'll get first look."

"And when did she say it was coming in?" Kemester pursued, his eyes glittering.

"Hopefully within a day or two." Larshall straightened as Kemester slowly got to his feet. "She said she wanted to sort and categorize it all."

"And rifle through all of it for her story," Kemester finished with a scowl. "Typical, but not exactly bad, as long as I get first read on that story. Come on, let's get some lunch – I'm hungry." His legs were stiff, and he stumbled slightly as he took a step, balancing with the aide of his creaking, overburdened desk

"Dmitri, are you okay?" There was real concern in Larshall's voice. "Seriously, you look dead on your feet."

"I always look dead on my feet," Kemester replied dryly, forcing back a grimace.

Larshall winced. "No, I mean you look like you haven't slept. Did something go wrong last night?"

Kemester didn't answer. Instead, his eyes slipped over the cubicle and landed directly on a closed door at the far end of the office. He

was one of the best Aurors around back then – and I know he hated that my father worked with Cassane – did Scrimgeour know? Is he complicit in this?

"Not wrong," he said aloud, his tone wary, yet thoughtful. "But it could have been more right."

Moody's eyes narrowed as Ron Weasley concluded his story. His electric blue eye whirled around, staring through the back of his head at the papers pinned up on the wall, instantly pinpointing the notes about Ernie Macmillian, and the strange behaviour that Hermione had reported through Harry. Could this be a manifestation of that behaviour?

"And... and that's it," Ron finished, shifting uncomfortably as he looked nervously around the office. Despite himself, Moody felt a cool feeling of triumph. Retired, and still intimidating, even after eight months spent in my trunk. "I really think we should do something, though, don't you, Professor?"

"We can't rule out suspicions, even wild theories like yours," Moody said coolly, his eyes flicking to Neville Longbottom, who, if was possible, looked even more uncomfortable than Ron in the room. "What about you, Longbottom? What's your story?"

"M-Moral support, mostly," Neville replied quickly. "And I can vouch for Ron's story."

"Good to have witnesses," Moody growled, turning to the wall behind his desk and pulling the paper down with the notes about Macmillian. "And where is he planning this 'meditation session', anyways?"

"Astronomy Tower."

Same place as previous attacks, and highest point of the school, Moody thought quickly. Plus nearly every single attack has taken place inside a tower of Hogwarts – another pattern, or coincidence?

"And was there anything," Moody continued, his voice harsh, "in Macmillian's body language that suggested that he was under the control of another entity?"

Ron swallowed hard. "Well, not exactly – look, it just seemed weird, Professor! I've got a bad feeling about this, and I don't want Hermione to get hurt –"

"Considering Professor McGonagall will crucify me if any students get injured, I share your sentiments," Moody said tersely, "but without more proof –"

BANG

Ron jumped back into a desk and swore as the surprising impact. Moody's nose flared as he beheld the twins, both distinctly out of breath – but with triumphant looks of their faces.

"Fred, George, what are you –"

"Later, Ronnikins, more important things right now," Fred said briskly, his eyes fixed on Moody as he regained his breath. "Sir, we have proof."

Moody's eyes narrowed. "Proof? Proof of what?"

"Culprits behind the attacks," George replied, tapping his temple. "Memories if you need them, but we've got a conversation that's pretty damning."

"It's Nott, Malfoy, and Zabini," Fred added, his jaw set. "Three fucking Slytherins, all with Death Eater connections."

"I... I bloody knew it!" Ron exclaimed suddenly, his eyes widening with shock. "I knew that already!"

Moody's attention immediately snapped to Ron. "Oh? And why the hell didn't you inform me –"

"I thought you already knew!" Ron protested, "And they were, well, the obvious suspects – I honestly thought Hermione told you already – and there was something I think Hermione might have mentioned about not knowing how the magic worked, so we couldn't approach them –"

"We've got more of an idea about that too," George interrupted, his smirk growing wider. "I don't think Malfoy's leading this one – Zabini was ripping into him when they were talking, and Nott was the only one talking about getting orders from You-Know-Who."

"If anything," Fred finished, finally having caught his breath, "Nott might be the one we want to go after. And whatever magic this is," he added, his expression growing grimmer, "I think it's killing him."

"Just like Voldemort to sacrifice meaningless people," Moody growled to himself, pulling his wand free. "But it still might not be safe to make a move just yet, considering what we know about the magic –"

"Yeah, about that," Fred interrupted, "I don't think we should wait. We're fairly certain that Nott doesn't have the ability to use the magic whenever he wants –"

"Primarily because he looked worse than a Blast-Ended Skrew –"

"And there's an attack going on right now," Fred finished, his expression hardening. "We came to get you – they said they've got multiple spirits possessing a Hufflepuff –"

"Ernie," Ron whispered, his eyes going wide again. "Oh... god."

"They're in the Astronomy Tower," Moody snarled, Summoning the ectoplasmic tools to his hand with a slash of his wand. "And odds are, he's got hostages."

"But what violent ghosts would you get from Hufflepuff?" Ron asked incredulously, drawing his own wand. "I mean, the house is pretty inoffensive –"

Moody gritted his teeth. "And that means Nott got creative – and Merlin only knows what that will bring."

"My Lord, messages have come in from..." Bellatrix's voice trailed off as her eyes went wide. "My Lord?"

Voldemort opened his eyes. Slowly removing his fingers from his temples, he willed himself to the floor, dissolving the silvery translucent sphere of projective magic around him.

"Speak, Bella. I am perfectly capable of understanding human conversation."

"My Lord," Bellatrix breathed, "was that –"

"Yes," Voldemort replied calmly. "Nothing but a simple test, to verify the magic works."

The insane, bloodthirsty smile appeared on Bellatrix's face as predictably as the dawn. "Then... then you plan to –"

"Of course," Voldemort replied, a bite of impatience creeping into his voice. "Speak, Bellatrix."

"First, your invitation from Mr. Cuffe to attend the Confederation meeting at the new Hall in Westminster." She wordlessly extended the gaudy invitation, which Voldemort took and read without a word.

"Apparently when the glass is removed from his hand," Voldemort mused aloud, "the man can be rather cunning." A snap of his fingers burned the letter to nothing more than hot air. "But I feel my presence will be rather... unwelcome at that event, and I wouldn't wish to go where I am not welcome. Next?"

"A letter from the Italians," Bellatrix said in a low voice, her face twisted into an expression of supreme disdain. "According to it, they have arrived in England, and desire an audience with you as soon as possible."

Voldemort concealed the mild surprise from his face. He hadn't actually expected the Italians to follow up on their bluffs and come to England at all. Either they are profoundly brave, or profoundly stupid – and in this case, likely both. Still, it would not bode well to underestimate them – they would not come if they did not have something up their sleeves...

"My plans will proceed as set," he said calmly, taking the letter from Bellatrix and crushing it in his palm. "I will see the Italians after my plan for Potter is completed. Anything else?"

Bellatrix's expression hardened. "You may have already been aware of this, but Severus Snape has gone missing –"

"I've been aware for nearly three months, Bellatrix." Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "Is there an update on where my servant has gone?"

"All we know is that there is a crater where his former home was," Bellatrix replied softly, "and that he hasn't been seen." Her eyes slid to a symbol carved painstakingly into the stone at the back of the laboratory – that of a skull with a snake erupting from its mouth. "Does the Mark allow him –"

"To be tracked?" Voldemort finished, glancing once at his insignia before looking back at Bellatrix. "No, it does not – it allows far more interesting magicks, though, and I feel that my dear servant will not enjoy its presence if he intends to keep living."

"Could he disable or dispel it?" Bellatrix's voice was hardly above a whisper. "Should we resort to more conventional methods to find him?"

Voldemort paused, considering his options – and then he shook his head. "No, not at the moment. The plans I have wrought are far too intricate to deal with a power such as Snape." His eyes hardened, and Bellatrix stepped back instantly. "But there will be a reckoning, and Snape will need to ... explain himself."

"Dunno why you slept in, Dennis," Colin Creevey complained, throwing a sidelong glance at his brother as they walked down the stairs. "You're never up this late."

"Hey, I actually managed to get some sleep!" his brother replied, stifling a yawn as he hurried after Colin.

Colin's eyes widened. "Really, you did? You were having so many problems before..." His voice trailed off – he didn't want to mention what happened to Dennis in Gryffindor Tower. No need to upset him.

"Yeah, I actually got a few hours," Dennis said with a tired smile. "Wasn't really a good sleep, but I can't complain – Colin!"

Colin stopped in mid-step – or would have if a strong dark-skinned hand hadn't seized the front of his robes and slammed him against the wall.

Colin looked up at the figure – and immediately regretted it. He didn't recognize the older Slytherin, but there was something about his expression, so awfully cold, that immediately made his gut seize up with fear.

"Hey!" Dennis shouted, pulling his wand free. "Leave my brother –"

"Shut up, you," the dark-skinned Slytherin spat, even as a Leg-Locker Curse zoomed from out of Colin's field of vision and hit Dennis in mid-stride, sending him sprawling on the staircase. "You – Creevey – you've got your camera with you?"

"No," Colin lied defiantly.

"Accio camera!"

The camera, which had been tucked carefully into Colin's bag, zoomed free, soaring through the air. Colin cried out, but the dark-skinned Slytherin smacked Colin once before dropping him on the floor.

"If you two Mudbloods know what's good for you," he said coolly, "you'll keep quiet about this."

"You took my camera!" Colin yelled, yanking out his wand. "Give it back –"

The Slytherin backed up a few steps and scowled. "I'm just borrowing it, Creevey, don't get your knickers in a knot." Then, before Colin could cast a spell, he took off down a hallway, diving through a tapestry before Colin could catch up.

"At least he didn't hurt you that much," Dennis said with a weak smile as he fumbled for his wand and cast the counter-curse.

"He took my camera," Colin said, his voice a mix of fury and confusion. "Why the hell would he want that?"

"I remember having sex in this tunnel."

This time, Harry nearly slipped on the slick stones, only catching himself at the last second as Tonks laughed.

"At least I was better here," he grumbled, accepting Tonks' hand as he pulled himself up. "I'm not sure we have time for a repeat, though."

Tonks' eyebrows went up, and a sultry expression filled her face. "What, you're telling me you don't want to have me up against these wet, slick, smooth walls, exploring every little inch of this tunnel –"

Harry gave her a frank look. "Really, Tonks?"

She chuckled in response, her hair going neon pink again and shortening. "I can't tease you the same way anymore. You're not as fun."

"Or maybe you're just running out of material," Harry replied wryly, as they continued walking.

"Or maybe she's... lost her touch."

Harry froze, the light from the tip of his wand casting long shadows down the tunnel that showed much and revealed nothing.

"Or maybe," the voice – the familiar voice – echoed down the hall, "she's losing her religion – and her soul along with it."

Harry knew that voice now, and his eyes narrowed. Haven't heard from him in a while.

"Peeves!"

Without warning, the poltergeist erupted out of the wall, his eyes glittering as Harry and Tonks scrambled back, wands extended.

"I've missed you, Harry," Peeves began, his eyes lighting up as he floated lazily closer, his smile wide as ever. "I'm glad you've settled down, found a nice girl – even as you two destroy each other."

Tonks' eyes narrowed, and even Harry was a little unnerved by the murderous look in her expression as her hair darkened. "What," she growled through gritted teeth, "did you say to me?"

"Oh look," Peeves said, his eyes widening as he zoomed closer to get a better look. "It's the science experiment –"

The rest of the poltergeist's words were drowned out by the flurry of spells erupting from Tonks' wand – all of which Peeves dodged effortlessly.

"That," he said disapprovingly, "was a bit uncouth. You'd think, Harry, that you'd teach her a different trick..."

"Tonks, stop!" Harry shouted, grabbing her arm before she could launch another flurry of spells. "He's not worth it, he's here for a reason –"

Tonks swiped her fringe of her hair – her matte-black hair – out of her eyes, which had now gone distressingly green as she furiously levelled her wand at the cackling poltergeist. "Yeah, and the reason will be –"

"He's baiting us both, Tonks," Harry said quickly, glancing between her and Peeves with concern. "Cool it down!"

"You really should," Peeves added, his tone mockingly helpful as he hovered around the low ceiling. "Besides, I've got a story to tell you."

Tonks took a deep breath, but lowered her wand. "Hope you know what you're doing, Harry," she muttered, even as her hair lightened a shade.

"You see," Peeves began slowly, "once upon a time, there was a little fat man and he was a wizard – and it tormented him every day of his life, because he had been told that being a wizard was evil. So he went to the king and asked nicely for a huge army of former crusaders to come north and destroy the big evil castle."

Harry glanced at Tonks, an uneasy feeling filling his gut.

"Now you might ask how all the good little Muggles could hope to find the big evil castle," Peeves added, his eyes dancing as he floated manically above them, "but the little fat man had a magical plan, and he knew if he could just get them to come out, he'd get them all. So he charmed a little group and they snuck inside, where the big bad wizards were waiting for them." Peeves voice abruptly dropped an octave, and Harry couldn't help but feel the bad feeling in his stomach solidify.

"They caught the little fat man and took him to the top of the tallest tower," Peeves continued, "and while they climbed up the stairs, he gave his little speech, and one young man, a brand new professor, was convinced. So he tried to free the little fat man."

Peeves' smile grew horrifically wide. "And then they set him on fire."

"What's the point of this?" Tonks growled. "Harry –"

"Then they took the little fat man up to the top of the tower, and the Headmistress decided that to send a sign to whatever powers the little fat man served, she'd set him on fire too, and bind his spirit to

the castle forever. But the little fat man didn't want that – he wanted to go on and face his Lord – but the Headmistress caught him first. She locked away all the nasty parts of him, and left the little fat man a little less." Peeves tilted his head sideways. "Although, ironically, not less fat."

"Peeves, a point to all of this?" Harry snapped, his patience straining to the limit.

Peeves raised both of his hands. "It's simple – someone freed the little fat man and that poor confused professor." The poltergeist's smile grew diabolical. "And I would guess they aren't too happy about things."

"Another attack!" Tonks whispered, her eyes widening. "Son of a bitch –"

"No time, run!"

They began running as fast as they could down the hallway, Peeves' cackling echoing behind them.

"Keep running, Harry – otherwise that timeless proverb will be fulfilled!"

What proverb? Harry thought to himself, tearing towards the steps that led up into Hogwarts.

The voice was suddenly in his ear, and Harry nearly stumbled.

"Only the good die young, Harry. Only the good die young."

Hermione was breathless when she finally reached the top of the Astronomy Tower. Take a wrong turn in this castle and you practically end up where you started. Don't think I'm that late though...

She sniffed the air – whatever Ernie had set up in the tower, it had a very peculiar odour, sweet and pungent. I know that smell... I remember reading about it in 'One Thousand Herbs and Fungi'... and I could have sworn Professor Snape said something –

"Hermione!"

Her gaze snapped to the door, where Ernie was waiting, a jovial smile on his face, his blond hair extremely tousled as he beckoned for her to come in. "Come on, Hermione, everyone else is here."

She gave him a cautious smile as she caught her breath. "Hope I'm not late –"

"Oh, nonsense!" Ernie replied, giving her a quick nod. "Just come on it, and we'll get started."

She hurried up the last few steps and entered the circular room at the top of the tower. All around them, the sun cascaded through the open windows, and despite the snow blanketing the countryside, the air felt as warm as a fresh spring day.

And scattered around the room were about twenty girls sitting on the floor, all of different years and houses – albeit with a few more Hufflepuffs and only two Slytherins, sitting in the corner and giving Hermione deeply distrustful looks as she stepped in.

"Ernie, what's that smell?" she asked quickly, her eyes darting around the room as she saw several slightly smoking braziers arranged in a large dodecahedron around them. "I could have sworn I've smelt something similar to it in Herbology or Potions –"

Ernie simply smiled. "Just a mild relaxant to aid in the ritual. Why don't you go sit next to Ginny in that little circle of sand?"

Hermione glanced down, and sure enough, the floor was covered in long twisted lines of white sand. She clapped her hand to her mouth as she saw that she had carelessly broken some of the pattern walking in, but Ernie just gave her a patient smile, although she could tell he was starting to get a bit irritated.

"Don't worry, don't worry, I'll fix it," he reassured her. "Just go sit down, we'll start in a few minutes."

Hermione's mind was racing – what kind of ritual was this? She didn't recognize any of the glyphs drawn on the floor at first glance, and none of the symbols looked particularly familiar – and what on earth was that smell?

She carefully sat down next to Ginny in the small circle of sand, and glanced around the room again as Ernie was carefully redrawing the glyphs. Despite the warm feeling of calm and relaxation, with the warm air and bright sunlight, she couldn't help feeling that something was a bit amiss.

"Ernie, do you need any help?" she began hesitantly. "I mean, I'm sure if you told me what you were preparing here, I'm sure I've read something –"

"Granger, do the world a favour and shut up," one of the Slytherin girls, a willowy brunette with a fair complexion and a foul expression that Hermione thought was Daphne Greengrass, spat with exasperation. "Merlin, I already hear your voice in my fucking nightmares –"

"Language, Daphne!" Hannah Abbott said, throwing the Slytherin girl a disapproving expression.

"Oh, you can go fuck yourself too," the Slytherin girl spat, crossing her arms over her chest. "Bloody waste of time –"

The other Slytherin sitting next to her, a blonde with a surprisingly honest expression, bent and whispered a few words into Daphne's ear. Daphne's expression softened for a few seconds, but then her usual scowl returned. "Whatever."

"Why are you even here?" Ginny asked, glaring at the Slytherin. "It's clear you don't want to be –"

"I'm here 'cause of Tracey, not because I like sitting on the floor with Mudbloods and blood traitors," Daphne replied, giving Ginny a sweet smile before turning to Ernie. "So, you finished in the sandbox here, Macmillian? Let's get this started, I've got things to do –"

"Right," Ernie replied with a pained expression, straightening as he moved to the center of the room. "Now, this is a very simple ritual, designed to, ah, cleanse the soul and thus allow relaxation and rest. When I light the braziers, I want you all to draw your wands and place them on the sand in front of you. Then close your eyes and attempt to relax – and try not distract any of your fellow classmates."

"When should we get some results, Professor?" Daphne sneered.

"It all depends how much you want to embrace the experience," Ernie replied enigmatically, his gaze sweeping the room. "Ah... Hermione, you don't need to raise your hand."

"You still haven't told me what that smoke is made of," Hermione said anxiously. "I swear I recognize it –"

Susan Bones sniffed the air as well. "It does smell a bit familiar – what is it, Ernie?"

Ernie only continued to smile that same, patient smile as he raised his wand. "It's just something I prepared for the ritual, just like the sand. Don't worry, it's not going to poison you or anything, I know exactly what I'm doing. Just relax and take deep breaths."

Hermione frowned – something still seemed off to her. She carefully drew her wand and brushed the tips of her fingers against the sand, carefully raising them to her lips...

It wasn't sand. It looked much like white sand off one of the beaches she had seen in France, but it had the strangest taste to it. It almost tastes spicy...

She opened her mouth to speak – and immediately inhaled a full mouthful of thick smoke, suddenly much more pungent and sweet. Her eyes watered for a few seconds as she fought to see Ernie – where the devil had all of the smoke come from all of a sudden –

She took another shaking breath, about to rise to her feet, but in the back of her mind, she wondered why she would even want to. The sunlight cascading through the room, the beams and hanging

astrolabes casting long shadows, blurry figures in the growing mist surrounding them... the sand on the stone floor somehow feeling just a bit more comfortable than it should have been...

She blinked, but the smoke kept billowing and billowing through the room from the braziers, filling the room with that sweet pungency that made her feel oh so relaxed and safe and sleepy...

Relax...

The voice wasn't quite Ernie's but Hermione was slowly finding it very hard to care... she felt so sleepy and relaxed...

You are in a safe place... a calm place... nothing can hurt you, as long as you are here with me... keep breathing and watch the mist lit by the sunshine... the sweet incense of purity and peace...

"Sweet... sweet incense..." Hermione whispered dizzily. She was finding it a bit hard to breathe in the smoky room – it felt as if bands were being slowly wrapped around her chest – but she didn't care all that much... it was beautiful, it was so beautiful, the sunlight turning every tendril of smoke a million colours...

You are in a safe place... just relax... relax and those pure in heart will witness a miracle.

Moody caught the pungent scent before anyone else did, and he slammed his arm across the stairwell, nearly sending Ron and Neville sprawling.

"Don't go any further," he growled, drawing his wand. "You smell that?"

Ron and Neville shook their heads, but the twins both nodded instantly.

"Could be some form of gas or poison," Moody said, muttering a few words under his breath as he gave his wand a few deft twists. "Not poisonous, from I can tell, but I'd rather not breathe it. Bubble-Head Charms, now."

Ron shifted slightly. "Uh, professor... I think those are sixth year –"

Moody snorted. "Right." Waving his wand, he cast the charms on Ron and Neville. The twins, already looking as though they had fishbowls on their heads, were beginning to creep up the stairs.

"It's a really sweet smell, Professor," George whispered, glancing back as they inched up the stairwell. "Pretty pungent too – you recognize it?"

Moody grimaced. Oh, he knew that smell now. Memories of the Auror infirmary near the end of the war came rushing back, to those three smells that had dominated every room: the clean powerful scent of antiseptics, the reek of dried blood, and...

"Opiates," he said in a low voice. "Muggles and wizards derive the chemicals from the same plants, and while Muggles might produce a more potent drug through concentration, we just got creative with the dilutions. After all, there's a reason poppy seeds are a primary ingredient in Dreamless Sleep potions" He sniffed again, and even despite the Bubble-Head Charm, he could still detect a whiff of the smell. "And we're only two-thirds of the way up the tower... if the formula's not cut with something, Macmillian runs a real risk of killing all of his hostages."

"How do we get rid of the smoke?" Ron asked, taking a deep breath of clean air.

Moody's mind raced. The Aurors always had a team plan when it came to gas or biomagical attacks, but it involved a fair amount of complex magic – none of which the students knew.

"Go get McGonagall and Pomfrey," he ordered, glancing at Ron and Neville. "Run as quickly as you can, and tell Pomfrey to grab antidotes for Dreamless Sleep – they'll work in a pinch until we can find out what the isolated components of the gas are. Twins, back behind me – if you feel your Bubble-Head Charms weakening, fall back downstairs immediately."

"How are we going to deal with the smoke?" Fred asked tersely as Neville and Ron dropped back down the stairs. "Maybe we should approach the tower from outside – that way we can get some surprise."

"He's probably set a trap to kill all the hostages the second that happens," Moody growled.

"But that assumes he sees us coming," George argued, casting a quick glance up the tower. "We come in from the direction of the sun and hit him while he's blinded by the smoke and sun."

"And the windows?"

Fred snorted. "They can be repaired later."

Moody considered the idea – it was quick, dirty, and considering how good the Weasley twins were on brooms, it wasn't a bad idea. But if the windows are trapped, or if Macmillian has a quick way to kill the hostages, we run into a lot of trouble...

Suddenly, he heard footsteps – footsteps coming from behind him. His magical eye flicked back, peering through the smoke –

"It looks like you need some help," Tonks said, her Bubble-Head Charm quivering as she gasped for air. "God, what's that smell?"

"Gas that we need to get rid of," Moody replied, a rush of relief surging through him as he eyed his protégé. "And Potter... of course."

"Peeves told us about the possession," Harry wheezed, clutching a stitch in his side and in two minutes, he quickly filled Moody in with Peeves' cryptic statements.

"That's interesting," Moody said warily, considering the ghosts on the lists he had compiled. "But not entirely bad – there aren't many psychotic ghosts in Hufflepuff..."

"We saw Ron on the way down, he said something about Ernie and Hermione –"

"And a load of other hostages," Moody said curtly. "With you here, Tonks..."

"Gas drill?" Tonks guessed, drawing her wand, her hair going a poisonous green beneath the bubble, her eyebrows going up. "That's... that'll be tough, Alastor, with just the two of us –"

"Can I help?" Harry asked quickly. "And what about the twins?"

Moody thought fast, reassessing the situation as quickly as he could. "All right," he said after a long few seconds. "Twins, take the ectoplasmic harpoon – if Potter goes up with an obvious weapon besides a wand, the possessing ghost might get spooked and kill the hostages. Then get on your brooms and wait for Potter's signal to move in."

Harry's eyes went wide. "Wait – what?"

"Tonks and I need to purge the gas, and the best way to do it is using Compression Charms. But if I don't want to pass out from strain, we'll need to work together to do it," Moody continued, his mismatched eyes fixing on Harry. "But I'm not willing to wait that long – Merlin only knows what Macmillian's planning to do up there. So that means someone has to go up there and distract Macmillian long enough to relieve him of the spirits, or even talk them into coming quietly."

"You think that's possible?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Harry, you heard the story Peeves said," Tonks replied, her grip tightening on her wand. "Think of something – you're the one who's supposed to have something of a 'saving-people thing', right?"

Moody could hardly restrain a snort. Yeah, seen that plenty this year, that's for sure...

Harry took a deep breath, and Moody watched Harry's Bubble-Head Charm ripple. "Okay, I'll see what I can do."

Moody pulled the ectoplasmic projector from his cloak and tossed it to Harry as his mind raced through a quick calculation. "The purging spells will require considerable concentration if we don't want to flood the castle with this gas, so don't expect help coming. When the air clears and you can't smell anything sweet anymore, wait thirty seconds before dropping the Bubble-Head Charm – the air should be clear enough, if my calculations hold up."

"And why do you think those ghosts will listen to me?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Good question," Tonks muttered, but she still winked at Harry.

"Because if what that damned poltergeist said was true," Moody replied, his magic blue eyes snapping skyward towards the top of the tower, "then the possessing spirits might be out for something else, not simple murder. And that means," he continued, his gaze snapping to Harry, "that you only strike when it appears that the hostages are in danger. If we present a front of nonviolence, we might be able to talk these ones down."

"That's a bloody huge assumption –"

"That's what the twins are for, Tonks," Moody snapped. "Potter, one last thing."

Harry turned, having already climbed a few stairs, his wand drawn and ready.

"Your mission is to get everyone out alive – and that includes Macmillian," Moody said, keeping his tone stony and implacable. "I will hold you responsible if there is a corpse – no students are going to die in this school under my watch, and Macmillian is being possessed – he's an innocent in this."

Harry swallowed hard. "Professor –"

"Enough chatting, Potter," Moody said curtly, glancing at Tonks, "'cause if there's a time for your idiotic brand of heroics, it's now."

"...and he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white..."

Their kind does not understand the word they stole. They speak of unnatural forces, twisting and warping reality to fit their avarice, changing and vanishing and conjuring.

It is not this transfiguration I have used. I have purified the word once again, lent it spirit. I have enabled a Transfiguration, a Redemption, a path to the Light... and those who will not submit before the Light will be consumed by the light...

The smoke is nearly blinding around me, but I do not fear. The foul magicks I have used have granted me immunity to the numbing – the Lord has worked his divine touch through even the foulest of devices.

None of the witches feel the ropes now tied snugly across their chests and throats – again, the Lord has given me the chance to redeem them through their own darkness. Each rope soars up and curls around where a great telescope once hung, and with but a single pull, they may be saved if a witch holds true to her wickedness and does not repent.

The fire will cleanse those who do not repent, and the flames will burn forever...

I raise my eyes and speak into the mist. I know where they all kneel before me, the flock before the shepherd.

I open my mouth to speak, and the smoke, to my mild surprise, does not hinder my words. The Lord continues to bless.

"We will begin this rite of repentance from the darkness of your souls with a simple creed, with only a single question."

I pause, waiting for their dulled minds to absorb the words. It is the moment of truth, and I close my eyes, my silent prayers forming in my mind.

"Do you reject sin, to live in light?"

After a few moments, there are murmurs all around the room. I relax slightly – all have responded in the affirmative.

But sin is an easy thing to reject, a construct of evil and human desires, and in the cocoon of light and mist, it is a simple step to take.

"Do you reject the glamor of evil and refuse to be mastered?"

The seconds seem to pass longer, but around the room again come the affirmations. Not a single rejection, for the glamor of evil cannot compare to the purity of His presence.

But now the last question, the moment where the Spirit may be rejected. It is a moment I fear, yet welcome – the hardest step towards redemption is always the most important.

"And do you reject magic, and all of its evil?"

There is silence. I hold my breath in anticipation, and then-

"No."

Harry stared from beneath his Bubble-Head Charm at Ernie, watching him start at his word. Didn't think the Impervius Charm would let me see through the smoke like this... glad it works, though, let's me see what's going on.

And he was unnerved by what he saw. The ground was covered in a spiralling pattern of sand, and in little circles of sand, about twenty girls were kneeling, partially pulled into the position by black cords attached to a pulley on the ceiling. And even despite the charm, Harry could tell that Tonks and Moody's spells to compress the smoke hadn't nearly cleared the room enough for Ernie to see – he was still looking around wildly in the smoke, searching for Harry.

Strangely, unlike the other possessed people he had seen, Ernie was composed and collected – well, he had been before Harry had spoken – almost as if he wasn't possessed at all. Harry breathed a

little easier. At least he doesn't look like something out of a nightmare, like what happened with Luna... could I even have a hope of reasoning with –

"Who dares intrude on this holy meeting – who dares to defile –"

Harry suddenly had an idea – a wild, downright crazy idea that he was fairly certain would get him slapped in the majority of places in the world, but an idea nonetheless. He took a deep breath and lowered his voice.

"I am a spirit, dispatched by God – and I do not reject magic. God speaks through me."

Ernie fell to his knees almost immediately, his eyes wide and staring. Harry, despite himself, was a little impressed. And the Bubble-Head Charm almost makes it sound otherworldly – this might actually work.

"My Lord," Ernie began in a trembling voice, "I do not presume to know you or your plan for me, but all of your faithful servants have decried magic for its inherent wickedness – are you saying they are..."

"Magic is not inherently evil," Harry said, thinking as quickly as he could, a small pit of nervousness forming in his gut. "Nor are any of God's gifts and talents."

Ernie's mouth opened and closed very quickly for a few seconds, and Harry silently took a step closer, his mind racing as he carefully avoided the sand on the floor. There is some sort of magic involved in this, and I really don't want to know what messing it up could bring...

"But why would God give a man such a horrid gift?" Ernie exclaimed, his eyes widening. "To be rejected, hated by his fellow man as a monster, an abomination from the depths of Hell –"

"People fear what they don't understand," Harry replied uncomfortably after a few seconds. A trickle of sweat was sliding down his temple, but he didn't dare break his Bubble-Head Charm to wipe it. He suddenly remembered how the Dursleys had reacted

when they had first seen Hagrid. "They fear it because it is not normal to them, so they judge it."

"People do not understand the works of God, and yet they do not judge it with hatred, but with reverence!" Ernie suddenly exclaimed, his eyes widening as he jumped to his feet. "If magic was truly a gift from the Lord, it would not inspire this hatred!"

Shit, didn't see that coming, Harry thought, racking his brain for something to say, but Ernie was only getting more furious

"What is this trickery? If you are a messenger from the Lord, recite his –"

"You yourself have used magic here," Harry said desperately, struggling to keep composure and power in his voice as he quickly took another step forward. This could work...

Ernie began to visibly tremble. "I used it only to purge the darkness from these witches –"

"God does not work through evil," Harry said quickly, holding back his sigh of relief at coming to the conclusion. And Hermione says I'm not logical... "He would never enact his will through an instrument of darkness or evil. God is good."

He watched as Ernie began breathing faster and faster, and he quickly stepped a little closer. Just a bit closer.

"Then why am I here?" Ernie asked, his eyes finally snapping to Harry. Harry froze, but he guessed the possessing ghost – who Harry was guessing was the Fat Friar at this point – had finally figured out the direction of the voice inside the thick smoke. "I only lived to serve God, and I died with his name on my lips – why am I still here? Why did he not deliver me into his arms, instead keeping me trapped in this dark castle?" Ernie shuddered, and Harry could see tears forming in his eyes. He felt a little sick – I'm taking advantage of the Fat Friar's faith... that's just low...

But he didn't dare say anything – lives were at stake here, and he didn't dare falter now. "There is a way out, Friar. Leave this poor young man, and step into the light. He... he is waiting for you, with open arms."

He couldn't continue – he wouldn't say anything more. But from the look on Ernie's face, the ghost was already convinced.

Harry steadied his hands, stepped as close as he could without becoming visible in the smoke, and held out the Ectoplasmic Projector. "Come."

Ernie shuddered, and the thick transparent form of the Fat Friar came out of the smoke, his eyes teary and desperate, his hands outstretched as he stepped into the mist...

And vanished the instant the central antenna of the Projector touched the ghostly fingers. The Projector shook in his hands and glimmered for a few seconds – but then it went still with a puff of smoke.

Harry exhaled, lowering the projector. That was way too –

"That was wrong."

Harry's eyes snapped with shock to Ernie, who was rising to his feet and neatly brushing off his robes and staring straight through the mist at Harry, as if he could see him exactly.

"Wh-what are you talking –"

"You used his faith," Ernie said accusingly, his hand dropping to a pocket and pulling free a wand, "and when you coerced him out of this body, you touched him with that... thing and now he's gone! You're sick."

"There were innocent people here!" Harry exclaimed, his eyes wide. "Ernie, snap out of –"

"You're not speaking to Ernie," Ernie said coldly, crossing his arms over his chest. "You are speaking to Professor Galahan, wizard – and

I would appreciate if you would explain yourself, and tell me just why I shouldn't finish the work the good friar started."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. "You're not –"

"I may be a ghost of Hufflepuff," Galahan replied shortly, "but that does not mean I am bluffing. I am quite serious."

Harry was strongly reminded of a cross between Cedric Diggory and Professor McGonagall – and it was highly unnerving. Focus, Harry, think!

"So," Galahan said calmly, crossing his arms over his chest. "You have two minutes, or I ignite the crystallized Combustion Concoction on the floor and send these girls to a better place. Go."

Harry began breathing fast as he thought as hard as he could, racking his brain for something that would convince the professor. He considered signalling for the twins to fly in – but at the thought of that, he tasted bile. He didn't want this to end that way. This ghost wasn't evil, and didn't deserve to be impaled and tossed into the Projector...

"You were a teacher," Harry began quickly.

"I was," Galahan replied curtly.

"You wouldn't kill your own students –"

"I taught in the Middle Ages, young man," Galahan replied harshly, "and Hogwarts has changed much over the past centuries. Sometimes lessons are very hard to face. Try again."

Harry took a deep breath. "Okay... look, why are you here? Why did you stay –"

"I stayed because somewhere, in my gut, I knew that the Fat Friar had a purpose in his seeking," Galahan said, giving the wand an experimental twirl as his face slightly softened. "He went seeking answers to his oppression, to find a truth – and what he got was lies

and hostility, and he was executed in this very tower." His lip curled. "As was I – the Headmistress was something of a tyrant."

"But why did you stay?"

"Because I cared," Galahan replied simply, "and I felt the poor man deserved an answer. One minute left, young man."

Harry felt like all of the wind was sucked out of him. He didn't know what to say, what he could say...

And then, like a chill damp blanket placed on his shoulders, he felt it. It wasn't fear or panic or anything that made him want to scream or argue. It wasn't even anger.

It was just... acceptance.

He sniffed the air – he couldn't smell anything. In fact, he didn't remember the last time he had smelt anything. Without a word, he quietly dispelled the charm. The smoke was still present around him, but even without the charm, the smell was distinctly muted.

"You know," Harry began quietly, glancing at where Hermione was tied, "People called me a hero, because of stuff I've done or crazy things I've survived. The past couple years were the happiest of my life, because for the first time I had friends and when there was trouble... well, it was really hard and I got really lucky, but it all came out okay the end."

Harry swallowed hard. "And then last year happened, and this guy... he was a part of your house, you know... he got killed and I couldn't do a thing to save him. And then, the next couple months... something changed. The world looked a lot bleaker and a lot darker, and initially, I didn't know who I could trust."

He blinked rapidly. "I... I was scared stiff, but I ran with it. I had to, I felt I had no choice – but the thing is, I did have a choice. I wasn't going to sit back and let people take care of me, but I thought I had to fight, that I had to do whatever it took..."

"And then last night, I saw a memory of my parents – and I saw what happens when you have to do whatever it takes for so long that... that it becomes the automatic."

He looked back at where Galahan was standing, possessing Ernie's body. "And then... then it came to me: I don't want to have to do that anymore. I wish it was like the old days... when things were simpler, when you didn't have to worry about this sort of thing..."

Harry closed back his eyes and forced back the emotions he knew were coming, all the emotions he had kept bottled away as tightly as he could. "But then you realize that, prophecy or not, you can't always be the hero you want to be. You can't always have the easy choices, you can't always win without sacrifice, not everyone is going to like what you do or understand why you did it -"

"Time's up."

Harry's gaze snapped up, and he took a deep breath and steadied himself. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't want to do that to the Friar – but I've got to think he's in a better place now than here. That he's free. And as for me..."

His voice trailed off as he glanced towards the window. "I want to be able to look in the mirror and like what I see. I want to be able to sleep without nightmares of what I've done. I want to be able to look out at my friends and be proud of who I am and what I've done without having to qualify it. I want to be able to tell my kids someday that their dad was a good guy."

He closed his eyes, expecting death at any second.

"But you can't always get what you want. And as much as I want to be 'the good guy' all the time, I think this world needs a different kind of hero – and I can settle for that."

The sunlight shone brightly, and the smoke drifted in the room as long seconds of silence passed by.

"Your choice."

Harry turned and looked at Ernie. "What?"

"Your choice," Galahan repeated, "will mean far more than anything I can do here. Your words are honest, but they are words, young man. Sincere words mean nothing without actions. So once again, you have wasted your time."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. No –

"But if I didn't appreciate wastes of time," Galahan continued, shaking his head, "I would never have opted to grade Ancient Runes essays – when all one tends to need is a good dictionary."

And before Harry's disbelieving eyes, Ernie slumped to the floor – the conjured ropes evaporating into thin air, leaving the unconscious girls to collapse on the floor – and the ghost of Professor Galahan stepped out. His transparent ghost was thin, his hair was neatly groomed, and his face, while looking as though it had been sculpted, had a strange warmth to it that Harry didn't quite understand. It was a warmth that you couldn't quite approach – and the loneliness in his eyes confirmed it.

"Stretch out your staff," Galahan said softly.

"You..." Harry whispered, "you believe me?"

Galahan smiled wanly. "I placed faith in the Friar, and that I would stay until he saw his rest, a chance many would never take – and after hundreds of years, I'm ready to see something new."

The ghost stretched out his hand, and Harry, his hands shaking, extended out the Projector. With a single smile, Galahan nodded – and then he disappeared.

The staff shuddered for a few seconds, glimmering in the sunlight – and then it went still with a puff of smoke, and Harry exhaled.

Looking around the room, he saw Hermione. Hastily stepping around the other comatose girls, he approached where she was lying, his mind whirling with what he could say –

"Harry!"

His eyes snapped up, and before he could say anything, Tonks was hugging him tightly – surprising, considering she nearly tripped on one of the girls getting across the room so quickly.

"Tonks," Harry whispered, "I –"

"I heard it all," Tonks said, her eyes wet as she hugged Harry again. "I heard it..."

Harry breathed a little lighter as he glanced down at Hermione. He bent down and felt for a pulse...

Only to discover her chest was rising perfectly evenly, and that her expression suggested she was content.

"She's just sleeping," Harry said, getting to his feet with a bit of a sigh. "Do you... do you think she might have heard any of it?"

Tonks shrugged. "Maybe, I dunno."

"You'll just have to make good on your words."

Harry glanced over to see Moody leaning against the doorframe, an Extendable Ear dangling from the edge of his wand, with a strange look on his face. Harry felt a warm feeling in his gut when he finally managed to recognize the expression through the scars.

"I heard it too," Moody said calmly, approval on his face. "About damn time, Potter. About damn time."

Author's Notes: so yeah, it's been a really long time since I've updated here. Don't have much to say about that, other than me being exceptionally busy and having a lot of work and things on my mind. However, for those of you who are looking for an update and who are fans of Antonin Dolohov in any way, shape, or form, go check out my fic 'Speak Softly, Love'. It's a companion piece for this story, it's over 25,000 words, and it adds significant back story to the character. It's not required reading material for this, but as a tie-in, I'm really quite proud of it. It also happened to win the DLP July Politics competition. So seriously, if you haven't had the chance to take a look, go check that out first before you go here. Go on, I'll wait.

Back? Okay then, let's do this.

First, an announcement. For those of you who have been following this fic since the beginning - well, for starters, I really feel sorry for you, because the constant waiting for resolution must have been insufferable at points - I do finally have good news, namely that I will be posting a new chapter here on every Saturday until the story is completed - which, after this chapter, is five more chapters and the epilogue. Yes, ladies and gentlemen and everything in between, closure is indeed coming.

That being said, this chapter was easily the hardest thing I've ever had to write. Just as disclaimers, I wholeheartedly do NOT support any of the actions taken by certain characters in this chapter - seriously, certain scenes very nearly made me physically ill writing them. I also expect that I'm going to lose a whole swathe of readers for said scenes, and frankly, I completely get why. It's not pleasant to read, and it was sure as hell hard for me to write. I do not begrudge anybody the choice to drop me a review lambasting me for said scenes.

So yeah, warnings for crude language, violence, and non-consensual acts of a sexual nature. Don't say I didn't warn you. And as always, read, review, criticize, and try to enjoy!

-Silens

The preparations had been completed a day earlier.

Lines of writhing grey magic drifted and twisted around the room like a spider's web, glowing brighter whenever a book or potion was touched, all surrounding a massive wooden armchair with thick plush cushions and a high back. Four sapphires were lodged in the legs of the chair, and they sparked a deep blue with every touch of the grey tendrils.

And in front of the armchair was a single table, and on that table was a single book, carefully flipped open to two exact pages. The words on the right page were glowing red, and it almost seemed that they were poised to leap clean off the page.

There were no words on the left page – just a black void, as if the entire paper had been soaked in ink and pitch.

Bellatrix's eyes were wide with lustful hunger as she watched the Dark Lord step into the room, his practiced gaze analyzing every inch. The grey tendrils did not touch him, but instead bent around his every motion, as if they were inviting him forward.

"My Lord," she whispered, "is it to your liking?"

Voldemort paused, and then turned slightly. "It will do." His skeletal fingers traced the grain of the table as he took a seat. Immediately, the letters on the book's page leapt free, soaring into the air and growing in a dizzying spiral as they began to rotate around the chair, the tendrils beginning to burn white at their touch. "If you speak of the plan we discussed... while elements of it lack a certain subtlety I would prefer, I understand its purpose."

Bellatrix's eyes were dilated with fervour. "It will destroy him, my Lord —"

"Of that I have little doubt. Now listen very carefully, Bellatrix, for my instructions will not be given a second time," Voldemort said, his voice implacable as he drew a vial full of purplish powder from his robes and set it above the book on the table. "Upon the signal from Nott, I will activate the magic. I may be gone for as long as two days, or as short as ten hours, but I am not to be disturbed under any

circumstances. If the Italians decide this is the moment to make their appearance, advise them to not test my patience. When the circle of letters around me glows green, I will make my return within the hour."

"I understand –"

"I do not think you truly do, Bella," Voldemort said, his voice sharp and ominous. "I am not to be disturbed. You will keep watch on the door to this laboratory and ensure that I am not to be disturbed. If someone wishes to disturb me, first make all efforts to persuade them otherwise before dispatching them. If there is an attack upon this house and I am disturbed, I expect to see nothing more than your bleeding, disembowelled corpse in front of my door." His eyes narrowed to slits. "And even then, I will find ways to make you suffer for your failure."

Bellatrix raised her chin proudly. "None shall disturb you, my Lord. I swear it."

The Dark Lord did not answer, instead opening the tiny vial of powder and carefully pouring it into a neat pile on the table. With a prod of his wand, the powder ignited and glowed an emerald green, and soon a faint scent of scorched metal began to fill the room.

"Now we wait, my Lord?" Bellatrix breathed, her wide eyes fixed on the flame.

"Yes," Voldemort replied softly, gazing deep into the fire. "Now we wait."

Zabini carefully scanned the hall once more before hastily shutting the classroom door, exhaling heavily.

"Colloportus. Nobody's close. We're safe."

"For now," Malfoy spat, raking a hand through his hair as he glared at Zabini. "It's only a matter of time now – Moody's got McGonagall and Flitwick and those damnable Weasley twins hunting us –"

"And they will concentrate in the dungeons, where they think Slytherins will hide," Zabini said coolly, drawing his wand. "Or they'll assume we went with Nott down into the chamber – not that we'll be this close to Gryffindor Tower – Malfoy, get off your ass and grab the other end of this table, we need more space."

Malfoy glared at Zabini, but grabbed the other end of the table and hauled it next to the desk, where they set it down silently. Malfoy had already cleared the desks to the sides and front of the room, leaving an open space in the center, plus a small barricade near the front of the room.

"We should have more light," Zabini said tersely, scanning the room. "Malfoy, light more candles –"

"There's enough light as it is," Malfoy spat, crossing his arms over his chest. "We'll get what we need. And I don't take orders from you."

Zabini gritted his teeth. "Okay, fine, then you'll take your orders from Nott when he drops by to give the signal. We've only got one shot at this."

Malfoy didn't answer, only looking towards the darkening window – the looming clouds around the setting sun were casting the sky an unsettling shade that looked far too much like blood...

"Malfoy? Damn it, what the fuck is wrong with you now –"

"I don't see why we – as in you and I – should be involved in this part of the plan," Malfoy said, fighting to ignore the unpleasant feeling welling in his gut. "It's Nott's job, he should –"

"Oh, for the love of – Malfoy, we're at the bloody end of this!" Zabini snarled, grabbing Malfoy's shoulder and spinning him around. "This is the fucking end – once our job is done, you and I can get the hell out of here and nobody has to know –"

"And then what?" Malfoy spat, yanking himself out of Zabini's grip and drawing his own wand. "On the run, while Moody and Potter and Merlin only knows what else chase us down? My family's suffered enough!"

Zabini looked as though he wanted to curse him into quivering bloody pieces at that second – and in his gut, Malfoy almost wanted him to try – but the black Slytherin took a deep breath and gritted his teeth.

"I'm not letting you leave until the job is done," he growled, his voice barely rising about a whisper, as he flung one of the windows open, "because knowing your luck, you'd squeal the second Moody found you and everything we've done would be less than useless." He glared at Malfoy with pure undiluted hatred. "You've picked a bad time to turn into a worthless dragonshit, Draco. What's wrong, you're too weak to watch it? Grow the fuck up."

"I am not weak," Malfoy said in a low voice, his hands trembling with barely-controlled anger. "But there are lines, Zabini, of good taste and decency, a code that we must follow –"

Zabini spat onto the floor. "That," he said icily, "is what I think of your precious little code. You think things are going to be any easier when you join with him?"

Malfoy opened his mouth to speak, but in the corner of his eye, he saw something shift in the shadows. He twisted and snapped his wand up –

"Oh, don't get hasty, Draco, I'm here with presents," Nott said, his eyes dancing madly as he tossed two brooms through the air – one for Zabini, one for Malfoy. "And though I didn't catch all of the argument –"

"A shame," Zabini hissed, his gaze never leaving Malfoy. "'Cause then you'd probably get something else besides a ruined face."

"- My part in this plan is completed," Nott finished, a cold smile appearing on his face as he clapped his hands together. "Now, I think we should get behind that barricade and start enchanting it. That way, in case something goes funny, we'll be prepared."

His insane eyes landed on Malfoy, and Malfoy felt a chill race down his spine. "Yes, Draco, for anything."

"Okay, do we have everything?" Harry asked, eyeing his two simulacrams lying within the wreckage of the Shrieking Shack. His second simulacrum was covered by some lightweight rubble, invisible if one didn't know exactly where to look. The other was laying primly on the stone, dressed in the best professional robes Tonks could find. "Wands?"

"Duh," Tonks said, giving hers a twirl and launching a light shower of pink sparks into the air.

"Paperwork and passes?"

"In the bag."

"Antidotes?"

"Courtesy of whatever I could raid from Alastor's supply when he wasn't looking," Tonks said with a wink as she jingled a small cloth bag before tucking it into her own professional robes.

"Toiletries, extra robes, all that junk?" Harry asked with a frown. "I know I didn't pack those..."

"All in the trunk, Harry," Tonks said. Her smile deepened. "You know, considering how much time you spend being a woman, you'd think you'd get more familiar with —"

"Ha ha, very funny, we'll laugh about it later," Harry replied tersely, crumpling up the list. "Sirius was in position about an hour ago around six, and he said he would pass along any scouting he got to Cassane, who we'll meet inside —"

"Harry, you don't need to tell me," Tonks said calmly, shouldering her bag as her hair went blonde and lengthened. "Are you okay? You seem a bit tense —"

"This is our big chance to prove to the world that Voldemort is back," Harry said, trying to keep the edge out of his voice as he stepped over the fallen beams towards the hole that once led underneath the

Shrieking Shack to the Whomping Willow. "And considering everything, I really don't want to screw this up." He sighed as he stepped into the hole. "To be honest, I'd rather be at Hogwarts hunting for bloody Malfoy than doing this."

"Well, think of it this way," Tonks said lightly. "Given the time sink, and comparing the date when we went in and when we came out, we can guess for every hour or so in Hogwarts, it's about two days out here. Hell, we're lucky we left Hogwarts when we did, we got out here with a day to prepare before the conference."

Harry snorted. "And strangely, I still think Moody will get more done than we will." He sat on the rough earth of the tunnel and tried to find a decently comfortable spot. "Did you find out if the tunnel is still open?"

"Apparently Sirius took a walk down it while we were in Hogwarts," Tonks called down, glancing into the hole. "You ready?"

Harry closed his eyes, and in his mind's eye, he could see the bright silvery cord connecting him to his simulacrum. He concentrated hard —

And then he snapped his eyes open —

"Tonks..."

"Yes, Harry?" Tonks replied lightly.

"I can't see too well with you standing directly over my head, but..."

Tonks chuckled. "But what, Harry?"

"You're not wearing underwear."

"And that means I've got one of two appealing options," Tonks replied without missing a beat. "But since we've got a bit of a time crunch, I'll let you get up —"

Harry breathed a little easier, but he couldn't help feeling a rather peculiar feeling as he got up. Even despite the biting chill in the morning air, he felt very warm all over. This is weird...

"-And save the rest for later tonight," Tonks continued sweetly, "'cause due to that rooming switch I confirmed yesterday, we've only got one room at Bonaccord Hall, and it's only got one bed."

And suddenly it got a whole lot warmer.

"Yeah," Tonks said with a wink as she took Harry's hand, "Moody's definitely not getting done more than us the next few days. You ready?"

Harry shouldered his bag and took a deep breath. "As I'll ever be."

She turned away from him, and they Disapparated, leaving the Shrieking Shack behind.

Bonaccord Hall, to Kemester's eyes, looked very much like what it was: a building that suffered the triple flaws of too much money, too little time, and a designer with too many ideas courtesy of the donors eager to see their money put to good use.

No wonder the damn thing is so big, Kemester thought, stifling a snort as he tugged at the collar of his smoke-grey dress robes. And none of it looks like it remotely goes together or matches. Yeah, no surprise why Fudge declared it 'one of the best new buildings in Britain'.

"So?"

This time, he did snort. "It's ugly as sin, Reed, what else do you want me to say?"

Larshall chuckled and shook his head. He had recovered with speed, and it hadn't been long before he was back to full service again – for which the overworked Hit Wizards were all grateful. "Never knew you to have aesthetic sensibilities."

"Yeah, well it's a damn sight better than Azkaban, that's for sure," Kemester muttered, glancing down at the pile of fancy papers in his hand. "And you'd think that the International Confederation of Wizards would at least try to make their paperwork sensible for the occasion –"

"Come on, Dmitri, it's the first opening of the Hall," Larshall said patiently. "You've got to give them something to celebrate –"

"Nothing for us to celebrate," Kemester grumbled, glaring at the building from the tree he and Larshall were standing beneath. They had a few minutes more left of their break, and Kemester was intending to use all of them. "And considering most of the bloody Aurors aren't even pulling their weight..."

Larshall groaned. "So Shacklebolt is apparently on a deep-cover assignment, get over it –"

"And so is Tonks?" Kemester retorted. "I haven't seen that bloody Metamorphmagus in weeks, what does she think she's playing at?"

Larshall raised his hands helplessly. "If Scrimgeour gave them clearance –"

"I know, I know," Kemester replied harshly, glancing at the silvery shape streaking towards them. "And it looks like break's over – come on, Reed."

"Dmitri Kemester and Reed Larshall, you two are to report to security," the lioness Patronus said briskly in the firm voice of Amelia Bones. "Kemester, try not to start an international incident."

"Yeah, yeah, no promises," Kemester muttered, crossing the grounds (which looked far better than the building itself, in Kemester's opinion) and entering through the heavy bronze doors of the front entrance. The marble entrance hall was designed to impress, with a sweeping domed ceiling and columns lining the walls, but Kemester could spot the rushed work in the cracking around the bronze doors lining the walls and the stone on the floor, which was already scuffed and beginning to show wear.

And it didn't help that the entire room had been haphazardly cordoned off for a makeshift security checkpoint. The other evidence this place was badly designed, he thought to himself, repressing a scowl. No good place for security...

"- he's not leaving anything behind –"

Kemester snapped out of his thoughts as he reached the small security station at the end of the hall, where a group of Hit Wizards were talking low voices. "Clyvis, what's going on?"

"The enchantments keep picking up weird disturbances all around the grounds," Clyvis replied gruffly, eyeing Kester with barely contained contempt. "We've sent a few teams around, but they haven't found anything."

"Could it be people planning to attack or break in?"

"No evidence anyone's even come onto the grounds from those points," Clyvis replied, his expression lightening with sympathy as he turned to Larshall. "No, we're thinking that it's 'reporters' who didn't get media clearances trying to get in. You two on security? Good, grab some Probitivity Probes and get to the main check-in point by the far left doors – that's where everyone signs the book and clears their papers. And Kester, I know you're an ugly motherfucker but try not to scare the diplomats, okay?"

Kester forced back his urge not to scare everyone and throttle Clyvis. Instead, he gave a wave of his wand, Summoning a Probitivity Probe from the pile into his hand. "Come on," he muttered, moving to the check-in desk and bracing himself for the inevitable intolerable rush.

Rita Skeeter was amazed – she couldn't believe what she was hearing, and in the strange world where she worked as a reporter, that was saying something.

"You're telling me what?" she demanded, snatching the paperwork from the check-in desk and scanning it again. "That my –"

"Your papers have been revoked, Miss Skeeter," the young blond man in purple Confederation robes replied brightly, a note of uncertainty beginning to creep into his voice as he watched the expression on Rita's face. "It says in my lists here –"

"I don't give a damn what your bloody paperwork says!" Rita snapped, her notepad and Quick-Quotes Quill snapping to her hands as she rounded towards her photographer. "Bozo, get back a little, I want this to make the front page –"

"Ma'am, please be reasonable –"

"Who else is on that list?" Rita interrupted, her hand darting forward and snatching the paper before the wizard could say another word. "Oh, what do you know, it's just my name and that of Paulus Amoccio, the two who happened to write an article exposing the truth about Fudge! Oh, Bozo, we have such a story here –"

"Ma'am, I'd ask you to return that list immediately!" the wizard began heatedly, rising to his feet, his hand going to his pocket where Rita guessed was a wand. "These are directives co-signed by the Minister for Magic himself –"

"Of course they are!" Rita snarled. "But he's not the one running this damn show, get me the man who is! I want to see Nathan Cassane, right now –"

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to calm down –"

"Cutter, take a seat."

Rita's eyes snapped up to see a new figure approaching, Probity Probe in hand – a very familiar figure.

The man – who Rita guessed was named 'Cutter', went red at the sight of the Hit Wizard. "Sir, she's been denied clearance."

"And I'm vetoing that," Kemester growled, glaring at Rita and Bozo with disappointment.

"Sir –"

"I'm your superior officer," Kemester barked, turning his glare on Cutter, "so do you want to keep embarrassing yourself here, or should we take this outside?"

Rita couldn't help but restrain a smirk at that comment – with his face looking as though it had been attacked with a man with a chisel and machete, Kemester didn't even have to try to look imposing.

Cutter held Kemester's gaze for a few seconds before relenting, hastily stamping the papers and ushering the two through to where Kemester's shorter partner was waiting.

"You caused a scene –"

"They wouldn't let me in –"

"And with that sort of unprofessional behaviour, it's a wonder why," Kemester snapped, keeping his voice low as he brandished his Probity Probe and carefully ran it over Rita's arms and legs. "Take out your purse."

Rita slid her purse across the table as Larshall's Probity Probe brushed against her back. "I have a right to be here, people need the truth –"

"Yeah, it's a shame Fudge isn't interested in that much these days," Kemester replied curtly, scanning through her rather large purse with his Probity Probe. "But that's not the reason I let you in. I need someone to keep an eye out for funny business that I can't catch."

"And you think there'll be much?" Rita asked immediately, her eyes lighting up eagerly as she took back her purse. "Do you have anything –"

"Skeeter, you're not interviewing me," Kemester snapped. "Your job is to keep a low profile – I've got a bad feeling about this already."

"And you think her being here is going to alleviate that?" Kemester's partner asked in a wry voice. Rita shot him a glare, but the heavy-set man only shrugged in response.

"Not particularly, but at least I know someone – besides you, Reed – is on my side in this building," Kemester muttered. He quickly stamped Rita's papers. "Quarters for the press are in the south wing, and keep that damn quill to yourself."

"It's my job –"

"I don't really care," the Hit Wizard retorted. "I got you in here, I can throw you out. Now move along before I change my mind."

"He seems on edge, Bozo," Rita muttered as she hurried away, her thoughts racing as she raised the tip of her quill to her lips. "Maybe something is going on..."

"I'm going to have to report that," Cutter began, his irritating whine of a voice already slicing a fresh headache in Kemester's mind.

Kemester looked at the thin young man – all one hundred and fifty pounds of him – and snorted. "Okay, sure."

"That was co-signed by her employer," Cutter continued angrily, waving the paper in the air. "Not just the Minister –"

Wait, what? "You're saying Barnabus Cuffe signed off on blocking Skeeter from coming in?" Kemester asked disbelievingly. But then again, if he's in cahoots with the Minister, I really shouldn't be that surprised... still, something seems off...

"Yes, that's what I said," Cutter replied with a sniff. "Now, if you'd excuse me, I need to handle these two ladies here. Papers, please?"

Kemester turned away from Cutter with disgust – but then stopped in midstep.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me.

"Yes, it looks like everything is in order," the young blonde man said with a professional smile, handing the papers back to Tonks. "Just up that way to where that grotesque creature wearing a Hit Wizard uniform is standing for security." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "He's difficult."

Harry could hardly repress a snort as he took his own pass from Tonks. "Yeah, when is he not?" Shouldering his bag, he moved along the cordoned path to where the man was standing, thick arms crossed over his chest and a very angry look on his face. "Hello, Hit Wizard Kemester."

"What," Kemester growled, his voice barely controlled, "are you two doing here?"

"Called to deliver testimony," Tonks replied brightly, sliding her bag across the table to where Kemester was standing. "Now come on, we've got lots to do, can't afford to get bogged down here."

"Of course you can't," Kemester snapped. "Nymphadora."

Harry forced himself not to visibly tense or show shock – much easier in his simulacrum than with his regular body – but it was a near thing. How does he – does he know that it's –

But Tonks seemed unfazed by Kemester's words. She simply drummed her fingers on the table, her cheerful smile never fading.

Kemester glared at her for a long few seconds, and then snatched her bag and pulled it open. "Reed, come give me a hand – Reed! Damn it, where the hell –"

But Kemester's partner was nowhere to be seen, and Harry frowned. He could have sworn the man was just there...

"Fine, I'll do it myself," Kemester snarled, and brandishing his Probity Probe, he proceeded to give both of them a very thorough frisking, and when he found nothing, he looked even more frustrated.

"We really don't have all day, Mr. Kemester," Tonks said, sliding her papers across the desk, her smile never wavering.

Kemester looked as though he wanted to punch her, and Harry couldn't help slide his hand towards his wand, but Kemester restrained himself to stamping their papers with impressive force.

"Here's your paperwork," he said roughly. "Your quarters are with the delegates in the North Wing." He turned to fix Tonks with a penetrating glare. "And you and I will exchange words later, Nymphadora. Now move along."

"Shouldn't you wish us a good day?" Tonks asked sweetly.

Harry hastily grabbed her hand and pulled her ahead, even as Tonks laughed softly at the expression on Kemester's face. "Are you trying to get us killed here —"

"Just a little fun," Tonks replied with a wink, tossing back her shimmering blonde hair in a motion reminiscent of Fleur. Need to make sure I ask Cassane about Fleur, Harry thought to himself. With so much going on, I'm going to forget —

"Besides," Tonks continued, "it's not like he can do anything."

"Does he know who you are?" Harry demanded anxiously, his eyes darting back to where Kemester was standing. "Tonks, he could expose us —"

"We've got a mutual arrangement," Tonks replied, but her smile faded a little. "He won't expose us if he values his career."

"Or his life."

The new voice from directly behind them nearly made Harry go for his wand, but Cassane only laughed loudly and clapped his hands on their shoulders, a wide smile on his face.

"Someone's in a good mood —"

"Have to keep up some appearances," Cassane replied easily, tipping the brim of his hat to Tonks and Harry in turn. Unlike the other Ministry workers and Confederation officials Harry had seen, Cassane's robes were a rich charcoal grey with the same unusual cut that made them seem like a blend of older Muggle fashion and wizard robes – although the rich burgundy ascot added a very different flair to the outfit. "The Ministry wants to present a jovial front to the world, giving the past year and a half."

"Hence the ascot," Tonks guessed.

"No, that's because I look simply amazing in it," Cassane corrected her with a wink as they began walking through the cordoned line. "So, I spoke to our mutual friend Snuffles, and while he was unable to penetrate the protections surrounding the Hall, he did manage to set up his own little defensive perimeter in case something goes wrong outside."

"What about if something goes wrong in here?" Harry asked, glancing back at Kemester.

Cassane paused for a few seconds. "Oh, things will go wrong in here, I can guarantee it." He took a steadying breath. "But that, we must manage as it comes. Go get settled in your rooms, and avoid the press as much as you can. Fortunately for us all, there is no luncheon today."

"You keep going on about them," Tonks asked curiously, "are they really that –"

"Yes," Cassane replied, shivering. "Oh Merlin, yes."

"And where the hell did you get off to?" Kemester demanded heatedly, glaring at Larshall as he hurried up. "Damn it, Reed, could have used you back a few minutes –"

"Had to take a piss, sorry," Larshall apologized quickly as he picked his Probity Probe up from the table. Then he glanced forward – and his face went red as he saw the older man – a militarily-dressed,

rather weathered-looking man with a flag pin to his lapel – waiting patiently on the other end of the table. "Oh, damn..."

"That's all right, young man," the man replied with a kindly smile and a very distinctive American accent. "Man's bladder waits for nobody, I'm afraid, particularly as you get older." He glanced at Kemester. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, Representative Adams, that should be all," Kemester replied, shooting Larshall a quick glare as the older man gave Kemester an informal salute that Kemester smartly returned.

The second the representative was out of earshot, Kemester turned gloweringly to Larshall. "Reed, you've got to be more careful – if that was the Russian or Transylvanian representative, you could have been eaten alive!" Kemester shook his head. "Maybe literally if it was the Transylvanian – thank god it was the American."

"He seems nice enough," Larshall mused, scratching his temple.

Kemester snorted. "Yeah, and if half the stories are true, the hell he's been through out in that bloody backwater of a country made him a force to be reckoned with." He glanced at the slowly growing line of representatives and their aides queuing up. "I get the feeling this is going to be a long day."

The grey flash lit the laboratory for a brief second, and Bellatrix started, but Voldemort did not move a muscle, watching every second as the light died away.

The signal had been given.

He stretched out his left hand and pressed it gently against the black page of the book, his fingers neatly spreading across the blackness, as if they were spanning a pit.

"Remember, Bellatrix," Voldemort said calmly, pointing his wand at the green flame, "I am not to be disturbed."

He didn't need to speak a word. The single spark jumped from his wand and touched the flame, and it immediately died. The remaining powder began to move of its own volition, darkening to violet, crystallizing...

A second spark jumped free, and the scent of scorched metal changed, and became distinctive, unlike anything Voldemort had smelled before...

Around him, he could see light creeping from the sapphires embedded in the chair, filling each of the grey lines of magic with fiery light that crept around him like a nest of writhing energy, a million different connections to a trillion different possibilities...

A third spark jumped from his wand.

The purplish crystal flashed and Voldemort watched with satisfaction as the world around him dissolved into nothingness.

Harry very quickly discovered why the luncheons of the International Confederation of Wizards were so infamous.

It wasn't because the food was either terrible or unrecognizably foreign, or because he had to keep swallowing antidotes to prevent against the certain poisoning – most of which meant he couldn't keep anything down – or even because of the alcohol that everyone was liberally sampling.

No, if it had just been all that, Harry thought, this would still be bad, but it would at least be engaging – the real problem is that everyone here is bloody insufferable.

He barely managed to snag a glass of water from a passing waiter and moved to an ivory-coloured pillar at the side of the room, breathing a sigh of relief as he waited for Tonks to come back from the bathroom. Just hope that nobody makes their way over, or certainly not that drunken Swedish delegate who kept hitting on me...

But a minute later, he saw Tonks stagger towards him, looking extremely pale as she hastily wiped the back of her mouth with her hand.

"Feeling any better?" Harry asked consolingly.

"The crab cakes have to be poisoned with something," Tonks replied shakily, biting back a swear as she took Harry's glass of water and drained it in a single gulp. "Good thing you avoided them –"

"You're welcome," Harry said sarcastically, looking down at his empty glass. "You know, that water was not easy to get."

"I'll make it up to you later," Tonks replied, carefully surveying the room. "You know, we've already been at this damn thing for the past three and a half hours, and Fudge still hasn't shown up, or any of his entourage – you'd think the host of this whole affair would make an appearance."

"Maybe he's meeting with Cassane," Harry reasoned, keeping his eye on the crowd and watching for another waiter with water even as he felt his stomach grumble unpleasantly. "Haven't seen him either. You kept away from the press?"

"As much as I could," Tonks replied in a low voice. "We're not very important at the moment, so they don't really have a reason to talk to us just yet..."

"But I do."

Harry turned, and he saw a very handsome man toying with his wine glass, with greying hair, bright eyes, and a clever smile.

Harry had to fight back the urge to recoil – because he recognized the man instantly from Cassane's memories.

"My name is Willard Parkinson, of Parkinson & Baddock, largest wizarding law firm in England," the man said lightly, extending his hand. "I'm quite sure you two, as young witches practicing magical law, have heard of me."

Harry forced his expression to remain neutral as he shook the man's hand. Can't give away that I know him – though if he's as good as I've heard... "It would be hard not to have, Mr. Parkinson – what, ah, brings you here?"

Parkinson extended his hands in a gesture of welcome. "Well, Miss Desdame, you and your partner have managed to attract quite impressive cases and clients. I mean, to be the legal counsellor to Harry Potter... well, it's impressive, to say the least."

Harry tensed, but a strange smile was creeping onto Tonks' face. "I suspect, Mr. Parkinson, that you're here for reasons other than the Confederation session."

"Am I that transparent?" Parkinson said with a laugh, but something in his eyes had changed. He seemed much more wary now. "Well, then why don't I lay my cards on the table: I would like to buy your legal practice and absorb it into my own."

Harry couldn't believe his ears – the 'legal practice' was a complete sham! We've never even prosecuted a case before a court –

And Parkinson probably knows that.

Tonks recovered first, and her eyes narrowed. "I don't think," she began slowly, "that our business interests coincide all that much –"

"I don't think you completely understand where I'm coming from on this offer," Parkinson interrupted, his eyes gleaming as his smile never wavered. "Miss Vuneren, I am prepared to offer you two a very large sum of money for the practice – payable as soon as everything is moved to the head office."

"Or," Tonks finished, crossing her arms over her chest, "as soon as you have possession of all of our case files."

Parkinson sighed. "Really, Miss Vuneren, why be so antagonistic? I am presenting you with an excellent offer –"

"One that we must unfortunately decline," Harry interrupted, his tone icy.

Something definitely changed in Parkinson's expression now – the look in his eyes was malevolent. "In that unfortunate case, I would feel obliged as a member of the legal community to call the integrity of your firm into question, and I'm certain that the Department of Magical Finance would want to take a look at your books."

Harry felt his gut twist with fear. "You don't have that authority –"

"Would you really want to base your careers on that assumption?" Parkinson replied, taking a sip of his wine, his tone as light as if he was talking about the weather. "Good day to you, ladies – my offer expires at the end of the session." And without another word, he strolled away.

Tonks swallowed hard and glanced at Harry's empty glass. "Damn, no water left –"

"You drank it all –"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tonks said hoarsely. "The bastard – Voldemort sent him, I'm sure of it –"

"So much for this secret identity," Harry muttered, glancing down at this simulacrum. "Do you think Cassane could do something about him –"

"If Cassane could do something about Willard Parkinson, he would have done it fifteen years ago," Tonks muttered fervently. "For Merlin's sake, when is the luncheon going to be over?"

"Not soon enough," Harry replied anxiously. Got to think of the mission – there is a point to all of this... we'll have the chance to inform the wizarding world of the truth...

Hermione stared down at her heap of notes, a growing feeling of horrible unease growing in her stomach. No, this can't be true... this really can't be happening...

"Ron, come over here!"

Ron looked up from the chess game he was playing with Neville with distinct irritation. "Can it wait, please?"

"Yeah, I'm winning for once," Neville said brightly.

"Only because my head might explode all over the board, and it requires all my willpower to prevent that from happening," Ron muttered, staggering to his feet and moving to Hermione's work table in its usual place by the side of the common room. "What's going on?"

"Okay, do you remember me talking about that theory regarding the age cycle present in the attacks?" Hermione began anxiously.

"Hermione, you say a lot of things," Ron replied tiredly, "and I'm sorry that I don't remember all of them –"

"I remember," Neville said, hurrying over. He shook his head with remembered distaste. "It was kind of icky, if I remember correctly."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Boys. "All right, well, I've been re-examining the theory with the new results that we have from the attack this morning."

"That you slept through."

"Doesn't mean I don't have the right to analyze it!" Hermione retorted, jabbing down at the papers. "Besides, Professor Moody filled me in on the details – anyway, I started taking another look at the cycle. The attack on the Ravenclaw girls – that symbolized conception and birth. The attack on Dennis and Filch was childhood, the Hufflepuff professor spirit was a young impressionable adult –"

"You forgot Luna," Ron interrupted.

"I'm fitting her in, Ron," Hermione replied reprovingly. "Now, according to what Professor Moody told me, she was possessed by

two spirits too, or so he thinks – except I think they may have been from different houses, one from Slytherin, one from Ravenclaw."

"But how can you assume that she was a Slytherin –"

"She spoke Parseltongue, Ron," Hermione said impatiently, "it's a fairly reliable assumption."

"So does Harry, and he's a Gryffindor!" Ron replied with irritation, putting a hand to his forehead. "Hermione, your theory's got some pretty big holes holes –"

"Just listen, Ron! I remember Harry saying that the 'Slytherin' ghost left of her own volition, and that he would 'see her again' – well, what if that means that in the next possession, he'll encounter that ghost again?" Hermione glanced from Neville to Ron with excitement. "We can then pinpoint the ghost –"

"Is this why you called us over?" Ron interrupted, closing his eyes as he winced, "to inform us that you might be able to find out who this ghost is, provided you spend another few days in the library?"

"No, no, that wasn't it," Hermione said quickly, pulling her last page of notes out of the pile and carefully laying it flat on the table. "If we take the young Slytherin possession for Luna as the teenager, and the suicidal Ravenclaw ghost as a young woman, we may have a pattern, with the Fat Friar symbolizing advanced age –"

"Excepting we're missing the Slytherin and Gryffindor possessions in between," Neville pointed out, tapping the paper.

"And that's exactly it," Hermione finished, taking a deep breath. "I hypothesize one of our houses will be attacked next – and I suspect it'll likely be a Gryffindor, considering it's Nott, Malfoy, and Zabini causing the attacks." She glanced at Ron, who was holding the edge of the table for support. "Ron, are you okay? Do you follow everything –"

"I didn't get to have your little nap this afternoon, Hermione!" Ron snapped, his eyes clenched tightly shut. "I don't think I've slept in days, and I really hope you have a point to all of this."

Hermione swallowed hard. "Well, here's the thing: if we consider these attacks as coming in a cycle, the final attack will be a Ravenclaw possession... and I don't think it'll mean good things for Hogwarts." She glanced at her two friends, her expression grave. "I mean... ravens are symbols of death, and the last stage of life after old age is..."

"Death," Neville murmured nervously, some of the blood leaving his face.

"Ravenclaw is just a name –"

"And names are important, Ron!" Hermione replied heatedly. "You-Know-Who certainly always thought so, and it would be just like him to try something like this."

"So... so what now?" Neville asked hesitantly.

"Hopefully Moody catches Malfoy and strings him up by his ankles like Filch always threatened," Ron said darkly. "Otherwise..."

"I just need to get a few books from the library," Hermione said distractedly, her mind racing. "I need to confirm my hypothesis – probably wouldn't be bad to talk to Professor Moody either..."

"Are you going to need any help?" Neville asked as Hermione began shoving her notes into her bag.

"No, I'll be quite fine," Hermione reassured them as she slung her bag over her shoulder, giving Ron a look of concern. "Ron, you should really lie down if your head hurts that badly, I'll see if I can brew something to make you feel better when I get back, okay? Just go back to your chess game, I'll be back soon."

"Okay," Ron muttered. "Thanks, Hermione, you're the best..."

Hermione smiled, and then hurried towards the portrait hole. Clamouring through it, she rushed down the stairs. Probably best to get the library across the upper floors –

"Hermione!"

She nearly stumbled as the familiar voice stopped her in mid-step. Her thoughts nearly scattered as she glanced down the corridor she had just passed by going down the stairs – and she could hardly believe her eyes.

"Harry?"

The small room they had been assigned was plain – certainly not on the level of the hotel room they had used when breaking into the Department of Magical Finance – but it was serviceable, and Tonks eyed the bed with longing the second she stepped into the room. The curtains were already drawn, and the lights were already dimmed –

"I'll go down the hall, try to get some ice," Harry said quietly, barely stifling a yawn. It was already getting late – the dinner and dedication ceremony for the Hall had dragged on for hours...

Tonks smiled wanly. "Not too much," she called after Harry before slowly closing the door. "Don't think we're going to do much drinking before we..."

Her voice trailed off, and her hand slipped to her wand. "What are you –"

"I said we were going to talk," Dmitri Kemester said evenly as he stepped out of the shadows. He crossed his arms over his chest with impatience as he sat down on the bed, "And now's a good time – took you long enough."

"You broke into my room –"

"Actually, for security, the entire team has keys," Kemester interrupted, drawing his own wand. "I didn't touch any of your things."

"I'll be able to verify that if you did," Tonks spat, stepping more into the room to where her trunk was propped against the wall. "Damn it, Kemester, what are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same question," Kemester replied coolly. "What are you doing here? I didn't even know you and your 'partner' received an invite."

Tonks glanced at the walls and ceiling with distrust. "You've swept the room already?"

"Obviously."

She lowered her voice. "We have evidence of his return – enough that a certain someone thinks we should present it to the Confederation."

Kemester's eyes narrowed. "Really."

"Really," Tonks replied, shaking her head. "I can still hardly believe it."

"Does Fudge know?"

Tonks only stared at Kemester, and he let out a long slow whistle.

"That's... dangerous."

"Well, it's about bloody time," Tonks replied with a huff. "At least then we don't have to keep lying."

"Except for whatever this is," Kemester said, with a knowing look on his face, "because this certainly is not a Ministry-sanctioned operation."

"And we already had an agreement about this," Tonks countered, drumming her fingers against her wand. "I do some hunting for your leak in the Department, and you keep your mouth shut." She took an unsteady breath. "Unfortunately, from what I've seen..."

"You've got nothing."

Tonks gave him a cold glare. "I could argue that I was busy doing other things, but I know you wouldn't buy that."

"Tonks, I want results," Kemester retorted calmly, rising to his feet, his scarred face shadowed in the dim light of the room. "And that means you had better give me something of value or I will go to Scrimgeour, and you won't be an Auror for much longer."

Tonks' fists were white-knuckled as Kemester walked towards the door, but she knew attacking Kemester would solve precisely nothing. I just need to find clues or evidence of something... hang on, wait a second –

"You were surprised to see us here," she said aloud to Kemester's back. "That we got an invitation –"

"Normally invitations go to people affiliated with the Confederation or the Ministry," Kemester replied with irritation. "Not fraudulent lawyers."

"Then why the hell did Parkinson get an invitation?" Tonks retorted, her hair darkening spasmodically. "I mean, he's not affiliated with the Ministry –"

Kemester paused in mid-step, and then turned around, his eyes burning. "Parkinson isn't here, Auror. I personally searched every bloody person coming into this building –"

"Well, then somebody has Polyjuice Potion or we have a security breach," Tonks replied softly. "You might want to take that back to your team."

"I'll be in the next room, ma'am," Bozo said, handing Rita a stack of photographs as he shouldered his tripod for the camera. "Make sure to call if you need any additional negatives for development."

Rita quickly flipped through the photos as she fumbled for her room key – given her name had been stricken from the list, it had been difficult to find unoccupied rooms, but thankfully Bozo had managed to snag two from a rejected news team. Nothing particularly striking in these pictures, but not every picture is for the front page...

She finally managed to fit her key into the lock and slipped into the darkness of the room –

Where a hot blue spell nearly took off her head.

The photographs clattered to the floor as she began to transform, her perspective dropping quickly to just above the floor. She felt her eyes compound, giving herself a new view in the darkness – there were two figures, moving fast.

And I'm faster.

She felt as if she was strapped face first to the underside of a broom or Muggle car as she raced across the floor, streaking towards the window, where she could get outside -

The incoming spell seemed supernaturally slow, and she easily darted aside, racing towards the wall. The entire world went perpendicular as she zoomed up the wall towards the open window –

Which slammed shut with a painful echoing crack.

The vibration caught Rita off-guard, and she felt her legs slow, lose their grip on the wall –

She didn't even have a chance to dodge the next spell.

She felt herself changing, growing rapidly, her perspective warping as the room became darker and darker...

And without warning, she was human, sprawled on the floor. She scrabbled to her feet in the blackness, stumbling on her heels as she went for her wand –

"Stop moving, or you die."

She froze, acutely aware of the wand now shoved against her back. "I'll scream, and –"

"Imperio."

And without warning, all of the thoughts of screaming vanished from her mind. A warm pleasantness filled her mind, and she felt perfectly content –

"Turn around."

It seemed like the most natural thing to do, so she did turn around. Immediately she felt her wand plucked from her pocket, but she didn't seem to mind all that much. Everything was quiet and safe...

She blinked rapidly as a light on the tip of a wand was lit, revealing a very familiar, very handsome face.

"You," Willard Parkinson said disapprovingly, "are not supposed to be here."

"Neither are you, and was the Unforgivable really necessary?"

Parkinson sneered. "Are you squeamish?"

"No..." the man's voice trailed off, "but it really does seem unprofessional –"

"There are times where it pays to be unprofessional," Parkinson said sharply, glaring at the unseen figure lurking the darkness. "You already paid off the photographer?"

"Bozo's been looking to get rid of her for a long time," the unseen man replied with a deep chuckle. "What are you going to do with her?"

"She's your reporter."

"A thorn in my side, more like," the voice corrected with a snort, and even despite the pleasantness making her not want to bother with thoughts, she recognized the voice... oh, she knew that voice...

There was a muttered word, and a second wand lit, revealing the satisfied expression on Barnabus Cuffe's surprisingly handsome face.

"Right now, however..." Cuffe continued, stepping closer and surveying Rita with a strange expression, "I have no need of her services. And despite my... distaste for this crude affair, you may do with her as you will. I trust she will serve you well."

And without warning, she heard a voice in that rich pleasantness of her mind – a familiar voice, screaming at the top of its lungs...

"-I MADE HIS CAREER, I SAVED HIS HIDE, I WAS THE REASON THE DAMN PAPER WAS SO SUCCESSFUL, THEY READ BECAUSE OF ME, NOT THAT WRETCHED EXCUSE FOR A HUMAN BEING –"

She suddenly felt Parkinson's hand began to caress her cheek as the pleasantness faded away in her brain, and she fought to keep her face expressionless. Just a few more seconds...

"Anything," Parkinson mused, his hand sliding down her neck towards her chest. "I like the sound of that..."

Rita kept the vacant smile on her face – and then rammed her knee into Parkinson's crotch.

"FUCK –"

She heard Cuffe begin to move forward, but she wasn't going to waste time. Even as she felt Parkinson's hand clench on the front of her robes, she slashed out with her fingernails, hoping to get her hands on her wand or Parkinson's eyeballs –

She hit something. She wasn't sure what – the light wasn't staying still – but she heard Parkinson howl and something wet on her fingers. She heard a clatter as something bright struck the floor –

The wand!

She dove for it, her fingers snagging on the familiar grain –

"Stupid bitch!"

Cuffe's foot slammed against her ribcage, and she could feel something crack horribly, but twisted away from him, concentrating as hard as she could, hoping to feel the compression –

It was like she had been hit with a saucepan, and she toppled back again –

Onto stone, not carpet.

Dimly, Rita could hear alarm bells ringing and figures running in as she tried to regain her senses, but something felt strange – like she couldn't feel anything below her waist, like there was nothing even there...

And then she heard the voices, drifting in and out...

"...Anti-Apparition Enchantments propelled her straight here into the holding cell..."

"...no wonder she's splinched herself – someone get dittany, we need to close these wounds and recover the missing body parts..."

"...hey, isn't that Rita Skeeter..."

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY WAY!"

She knew that voice, and her eyes fluttered open as she could see a burly figure shoving his way to the front, kneeling next to her, his scarred face twisted into an unfamiliar expression of concern...

"Skeeter, what the – why the hell did you try to Apparate –"

"Parkinson," she whispered, a bubble of blood leaking through her lips. "Parkinson... Cuffe... tried to... they said they would..."

Dmitri Kemester's eyes widened. "You said Parkinson? Are you absolutely – no, of course you're sure... Reed, get a fucking stretcher, we need to get her to St. Mungo's NOW!"

She heard a clatter as Hit Wizards rushed forward, but for the moment, she didn't care. The pain was almost muted as she grabbed Kemester's hand.

"They tried to..." she whispered again, "they would have..."

"Shh," Kemester said quickly, "I know, I know... fuck, I'm going to get them, Rita, I fucking swear I'm going to get them – call in an alert, goddamn it, she's lost most of her fucking torso not to mention the leg, I need the dittany NOW –"

"They need to know..." Rita whispered, her vision beginning to whirl as it darkened around the edges. "The story..."

And then it all went black.

Kemester rose to his feet, and drew his wand as the Hit Wizards rushed in around them, carefully moving Rita Skeeter's unconscious, maimed form onto the stretcher.

He closed his eyes, and fought to control the raw fury boiling up inside of him as his breathing accelerated. Something got past us, and it... and it...

"Dmitri, we're going to get her to St Mungo!" Larshall shouted, as two other Hit Wizards rushed away with the stretcher. "Dmitri –"

"Get me Nathan Cassane," Kemester growled, his voices somehow cutting through all of the noise. "I want him here. After Rita's been taken out, lock down the entire Hall – nothing in or out. After that, I want Nymphadora Vuneren and Clarissa Desdame in this office, I want Minister Fudge in this office, and most importantly, if I don't see Barnabus Cuffe and Willard Parkinson in this holding cell in the next five minutes, I will personally go and find them and paint the walls with the blood of their severed cocks!"

"I thought you went back with Tonks," Hermione said with confusion, as Harry came closer. "I mean, you said you were –"

"I had to come back," Harry interrupted, his eyes fixed on Hermione with a strange intensity. "I needed to talk to you."

Talk to me... that's not typical... unless... "Are you coming to talk to me about the theories?" she asked breathlessly. "About the spirits –"

"Shh!" Harry whispered quickly, glancing up and down before gesturing for her to come closer. "Inside the classroom, we don't want to be overheard."

Hermione nodded silently, and turned the nearby doorknob – and it was locked.

"Should we try the next one –"

"No, I've got it," Hermione said irritably, drawing her wand. "Alohomora!"

The lock clicked, and Harry shoved the door open. Hermione moved inside first, glancing around the unused classroom, where most of the desks were piled up along the side of the room, leaving plenty of open space.

"Right," she began quickly, dropping her bag on the floor and kneeling next to it, scanning through the clutter of papers. "So, here's what I found out –"

She reached inside her bag to pull out her diagram – just as Harry's boot connected with her face.

The inner conference room was silent, and despite the ornate and cushioned furnishings, nobody was comfortable. It hadn't been a pleasant night in the slightest, and from the look on Kemester's face, Harry guessed that it wouldn't get better any time soon.

"I don't think we have any other options, at this point," Cassane began quietly, folding his hands. "Word of this will spread all across the Hall, and we will have an international incident on our hands. Another one."

He looked up and faced Cornelius Fudge. "Minister, you have to cancel the remaining session and call a formal investigation."

"And risk losing even more of our international standing?" Umbridge asked, her voice filled with annoyed incredulity.

"Rita Skeeter is critically wounded – possibly dying," Kemester growled, "and the culprits are running free through this very facility – and all you bloody care about is –"

"Kemester," Scrimgeour said with a warning tone, glaring at the enraged Hit Wizard. "Remain composed, or I will have you removed."

"I told you he was dangerously unstable," Umbridge said in a stage whisper, nodding at Fudge, who was eyeing Kemester with a deeply suspicious expression. "Clearly not fit for active duty –"

Kemester leapt to his feet, his wand in his fist. "You miserable –"

"Kemester!" Scrimgeour snapped. "Sit down."

"He's on edge, and justifiably so," Cassane said coolly as Kemester dropped into his chair, hatred radiating from every pore, "considering who the implicated parties are –"

"The editor-in-chief of the Daily Prophet and the head of the most prestigious wizarding legal firm in the country!" Fudge exclaimed, tossing his quill onto the table. "Such wild accusations, particularly from a reporter who wasn't even supposed to be on site –"

"Because you didn't want unfriendly press," Cassane interrupted, leaning closer and fixing Fudge with a grim stare. "Don't think I didn't see right through that, Minister."

Fudge reddened, but lost none of his bluster. "The fact remains, she wasn't supposed to be here –"

"And neither was Parkinson," Kemester hissed, his scarred face twisted into a sneer.

"Then if he got in, whose fault was that?" Fudge shot back triumphantly, pointing at Kemester. "Your team said Bonaccord Hall was supposed to be impenetrable!"

"We don't have the time to place blame," Scrimgeour said tersely, glaring at Kemester again. "What we need to decide is how to proceed with this and handle the damage. Hit Wizard Kemester, your professional opinion?"

"Seal and cordon the entire building," Kemester replied immediately, cracking his knuckles. "Search every inch of it. Interrogate every person here, get every scrap of information that can possibly be attained. Mobilize our back-up to raid the Daily Prophet and the offices of Parkinson & Baddock, and confiscate every file."

"You only have the word of a reporter –"

"An eyewitness reporter," Kemester snarled.

"A paparazzi reporter," Fudge replied scathingly. "Given her own unauthorized presence at this conference, I would hardly take her word."

Didn't stop you before, Harry thought bitterly.

"Parkinson's presence can be confirmed," Kemester said, pointing at where Harry and Tonks were sitting, very distinctly out-of-place. "Those two encountered him during the luncheon."

"He presented us a business offer," Tonks added, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "He wanted to absorb our practice."

"And before you say anything," Cassane finished, fixing Fudge with a warning stare, "I can vouch for the two of them."

Fudge looked very disgruntled at that news. "Fine... fine, then there is nothing wrong with calling in Parkinson and Cuffe and asking them a few questions, but we cannot cancel the Confederation session for that!"

"Do I need to emphasize again," Kemester said, his voice quaking with rage, "that Rita Skeeter was nearly assaulted and is likely dying at this very instant –"

"You've emphasized it plenty," Scrimgeour said curtly. "Mugwump Cassane, you believe the conference should not continue?"

"I'm deferring to Hit Wizard Kemester's judgement on this matter," Cassane replied calmly, raising his hands. "As he is the lead investigator of this case – unless, of course, he is overruled."

A brief expression of shock crossed Kemester's face at the acknowledgment of Cassane – a look that briefly caused Harry to grin, but Fudge was undaunted.

"The session must continue," he said flatly. "I am the Minister for Magic, and that is my decision –"

"Well, forgive me, Minister," Cassane replied calmly, "but in this case, I feel I should defer to someone with experience dealing with investigations – namely, Auror Scrimgeour? Well, Rufus, what is the plan?"

Scrimgeour took a deep breath, and looked at Kemester, and then Fudge, his golden eyes darkening as he looked down at the table.

"At this time," he said grimly, "I must defer to the Minister."

Kemester didn't snap to his feet this time, but the look of shock and fury on his face was mirrored by Harry and Tonks alike. How can they – why the hell is he siding with the Minister on this now against Cassane –

Cassane's eyes narrowed. "I truly hope," he began, "that this decision does not stem from any... residual feelings you may have towards –"

"Not everything's about you, Cassane," Scrimgeour said with a scowl as he rose to his feet. "However, Kemester's investigation will continue throughout the course of this session. He will be allowed to interrogate witnesses and suspects – with the provisions of diplomatic

immunity, obviously – and we will begin policy meetings tomorrow, so we can get this over with and send the diplomats home." Scrimgeour fixed Fudge and Umbridge with a stern glare as they immediately began to protest.

"We have an important schedule to keep –"

"We shouldn't risk making the delegates feel uncomfortable –"

"Most of your delegates spent all of lunch today running back and forth from the bathroom to vomit," Scrimgeour snapped, "so one would think that discomfort is part of the package, particularly if it could be saving their lives."

Kemester seethed as he stormed from the inner conference room.

He didn't understand it. How could Scrimgeour do it – why would he jeopardize the integrity of the entire investigation, make things that much more difficult –

"Kemester!"

He paused in midstep and turned as Scrimgeour approached. "I've got work to do, sir, so let's make this brief."

"I don't like your tone, Hit Wizard –"

"I don't like the fact you jeopardized our entire investigation!" Kemester roared, his temper finally breaking loose. "What the fuck are you playing at –"

"Keep your voice down!" Scrimgeour hissed, seizing Kemester's robes and fixing him with a furious stare. "If I hadn't agreed with Fudge, I would be fired before my ass left the seat, and you had better bet that Cassane would not have objected to that!"

Kemester yanked himself out of Scrimgeour's grip as he reigned in his temper. "Good enough reason."

"That being said, and despite your terrible behavior, I still want you in charge of this investigation," Scrimgeour continued. "I want you to go to St. Mungo's, to get Skeeter's statement when she wakes up."

"I'm better here –"

"Larshall and I will handle things here," Scrimgeour replied, "and I'll bring in Amelia Bones as soon as she gets in. Rest assured, there will be justice."

"Justice..." Kemester whispered bitterly. "Tell me, Scrimgeour, you knew my father – do you think, in the end, he got justice?"

And with that, he turned down a side corridor and left Scrimgeour standing in the hall, a shocked look on his face.

"You didn't put up much of a fight in there –"

"Because ultimately, this can still work in our favour," Cassane replied bracingly as he, Tonks, and Harry reached the door to their room. "The investigation will catch Parkinson and Cuffe, and we'll still have the chance to make our statement. In fact, we'll get to make it even earlier."

"Parkinson said he would expose us to the Ministry," Tonks said worriedly, raking a hand through her hair. "No matter how good our statement is, it wouldn't survive contact with that argument."

"And considering he's on the run now, he won't have the chance to make that argument," Cassane countered with a satisfied grin as Harry unlocked the door. "Get some sleep, you two – tomorrow's going to be a big day, and for once, everything will be just fine."

Pain exploded across her face as she reeled back from the blow, falling hard against the stone, her wand slipping from her fingertips and skittering across the floor –

Her conscious mind hadn't caught up with what happened – all she knew was that she needed her wand, and she rolled onto her front, stretching out wildly for her wand –

The boot came down again, and Hermione screamed in pain she heard the cracking sound of breaking bones and the crunching sound of broken bones being driven into the stone.

Tears began streaming down her face, and she tasted something that tasted horribly like blood in her mouth as she fought to pull her hand free from beneath the boot, which was now twisting downwards –

Then before her disbelieving eyes, she saw a hand – Harry's hand – dart down and snag up the wand.

Her wand.

Her mind had caught up with everything now – and it refused to believe what it was seeing.

The pressure on her hand lightened, and she snatched it back – only for another explosion of agony as she moved her broken fingers –

CRACK

The spell hit Hermione without warning, right across the face. She felt her nose crunch at the blow, and fresh blood spill into her mouth. She toppled backwards, and she clumsily tried to avoid landing on her broken fingers.

It didn't work.

She opened her mouth to scream in pain, for help, for anyone – but to her shock, no noise emerged from between her lips. She suddenly couldn't hear herself breathing –

"Close your mouth."

Hermione knew that voice – it was Harry's.

No. This can't be happening.

Harry extended his wand, no expression on his face.

This is a nightmare – I'm going to wake up, I have to wake up, this isn't happening –

The spell from her wand hit her directly in the face.

This blow wasn't as strong, and she quickly recovered, opening her mouth to scream –

But she couldn't. Something had been stretched over her lips. She raised her good hand to her face – it felt sickeningly like skin, like her lips had been slathered with fresh skin and fused together –

"This isn't a nightmare, Hermione."

She couldn't catch her breath, she could only breathe through her nose as she scrabbled back –

Only for the stone to liquidify beneath her. She tried to scramble up, the tears rushing down her face – only for another spell to catch her ankles and drop her hard back into the stone-turned-mud of the floor. The mud coated her robes and covered her hair, mixing with the blood -

"This is real, Hermione."

Her eyes were wide as she fought to pull herself up again, pulling at her fused lips as hard as she could, fighting against the agony exploding through her –

And then the stone around her hands and ankles solidified, encasing them in solid, inescapable rock. She was sprawled across the now-solid floor, her hair suddenly heavy, her legs spread in a painfully awkward position

She felt her heart pound wildly, uncontrollably, in her chest as she saw Harry – no, it couldn't be Harry, it couldn't be him, it just couldn't –

"Oh, it's me," Harry replied, a trace of a grin crossing his face as he watched her try to yank herself free of the rock with no success. He raised his wand to his lips, and without a word, it began to glow red-hot. "It's Harry, Hermione – you know it's me."

It has to be Polyjuice, her mind screamed, it has to be Polyjuice or something, it's not him, he wouldn't –

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you should," Harry whispered, answering her thoughts, his voice abruptly cold. "But I don't need to lie – it's me, and you know it."

But then he smiled – and for the first time in her life, the sight of that smile filled her with gut-wrenching terror.

"But enough talk – I think it's time we take off some clothes, and turn this into a night you'll never forget."

It always amazed Tonks how easily the Ministry wasted money.

The waiting room they were standing in could have easily been spartan, with a few simple tables and chairs, perhaps with a few tasteful paintings. Instead, the room was a lavishly appointed monstrosity of mahogany and dark stone. The two doors – one to the Conference Chamber, the other to the rest of the Hall – were stout and unnecessarily heavy. Paintings in gilded frames were strewn haphazardly along the walls and even the twin arched windows were embossed with metallic frames.

None of it made her feel the least bit better – and from the pained look on Harry's face, she guessed the same was true with him.

"You think that introductions would go a little quicker," he muttered, moving up to one of the windows and squinting to look outside through the piercingly bright dawn. "Or that Cassane would speed things along –"

"There are always delays when it comes to this sort of thing," Tonks replied with a shrug, "even more likely considering that Scrimgeour bumped everything up to today."

"They still haven't found Parkinson or Cuffe." Harry took an unsteady breath. "I don't get it – why go after Rita Skeeter, of all people? I mean, how could they have known she was even here, she wasn't supposed to be on the list!"

"Maybe she found out something nobody wanted to know," Tonks replied after a few seconds of thought as she toyed with a stray lock of blonde hair. "I don't know, Harry – hopefully, when Kemester takes her statement, we can get something."

Harry closed his eyes, and Tonks stepped closer with growing concern. He's not looking great... granted, our sleep last night was interrupted, but I'd think he'd be okay...

"What do you think will happen?" Harry asked suddenly, looking out the window into the snow-covered courtyard. "What do you think Fudge will say?"

"I think Cassane will be able to shout him down, or at least prevent him from commenting during our presentation," Tonks replied, idly reaching back and scratching her shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll get the chance to say our piece."

There was a rattle at the door to the hall, and Tonks glanced over to see the door open a crack, and Kemester's partner Larshall poke his head inside.

"They're just coming in now, ladies," he said, a little breathless from pushing the heavy door open. "I'll come back around to the other door and let you two in when it's time for your speech."

"Thank you," Tonks replied curtly, turning back to Harry as Larshall pulled the door shut with a loud grunt.

"You have to wonder," Harry said, almost unaware that he was speaking aloud, "what Dumbledore's doing, whether he'd think this is the right thing to do. He made a speech saying that Voldemort is back, and look what happened to him."

"Times have changed," Tonks said calmly, ignoring the pit of nervousness in her own stomach. "Changed a great deal. Considering everything that's happened, both with Hogwarts and with the Ministry..."

Harry slid his hand into hers. "Well, this is the moment – after this, the war starts for real."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Tonks' blood ran cold – she knew that voice. But it can't be... not now...

She whirled around at the same moment as Harry, and Peeves laughed loudly as he floated lazily around the room, as if he was doing nothing more dangerous than telling a crude joke.

But this time, his expression was different. There was something about his smile, something that made the hair on Tonks' back stand up on edge.

He knows something.

Click.

The first time Nott had snapped the camera, Malfoy had been caught off-guard, and he had nearly jumped up. But then he had seen Zabini's disgusted sneer, and he had settled back down behind the piled desks, out of sight, out of mind...

It was better to be out of mind – particularly considering the scene in front of them.

He had felt the same thrill of horror and anticipation he was sure Zabini and Nott had felt when he saw Granger and Potter enter the room – but that thrill was gone the instant Potter's boot had collided with Granger's face.

From that second on, he had just felt sick.

Click.

He could tell Zabini's eyes were on him – he knew the other Slytherin was watching him for any slip, any sign of weakness. And so he kept his face implacable, even as Granger was hit again and again...

He closed his eyes and fought to control the feelings in his gut, the traitorous thoughts in his mind that were screaming for him to do something, anything, to save her from this...

"But enough talk – I think it's time we take off some clothes, and turn this into a night you'll never forget."

His eyes snapped open uncontrollably. Blaise simply folded his arms, his face expressionless. Nott was practically salivating at the scene.

He watched Potter stalk closer before crouching between Granger's trapped legs, his wand glowing white-hot.

Click.

She couldn't scream. Despite how hard he tried, he couldn't tear his gaze away, not see the tears rolling down her face, not hear the ripping sounds of cloth tearing...

Click.

He saw her jerk in agony, like a hand puppet twisting at every subtle gesture of the puppeteer...

Click.

Her fused lips were red, the cries bottled behind as the ripping sounds grew louder and blood began to trickle and pool around Potter's boots...

Click.

The tears were still coming, but her brown eyes were rolling back as her struggles faltered. She couldn't close her eyes, but he could tell her mind was trying not to comprehend what she was seeing.

It was futile.

Click.

The struggles slowed, and now she only moved when he moved her...

She was just a marionette, a broken doll.

And the blood was slowly seeping across the cracks in the floor.

Click.

And with second, he knew that there would be no coming back from this, no redemption, not even a just reward...

Just damnation.

Click.

The line had been crossed.

No, he thought suddenly, the line had been crossed long ago. This is just the breaking point.

The fear of defiance was gone – the growing fury had burned it away. He didn't care if his actions would damn him.

"I'm already damned," he whispered.

Zabini's eyes widened. "Draco –"

He leapt to his feet, his wand already glowing, clarity burning his eyes.

I should have done this long ago.

"Blaise, Nott, I quit. EXPULSO!"

"Peeves, I think you should know that I am about this close to –"

Peeves shook his head with mock sadness. "Oh, Harry, Harry, Harry, all those threats – and yet you already know there's not a thing you can do to me, even with all of your strength."

"I dunno, Dumbledoredestroyed the soul of that old caretaker," Harry snarled, taking a step closer to the poltergeist, who floated carefully out of reach. "Maybe I should give the spell a little try –"

"And miss all the important things I might have to say?" Peeves replied with a giggle as he zoomed out of the direct sunlight towards the marble fireplace. "Jeopardize all that?"

Tonks felt a horrible feeling well up in her gut as she stepped closer. "Are you trying to tell us there's been another attack?"

Peeves cocked his head sideways. "Maybe," he drawled, drawing out every syllable of the word.

"Son of a bitch, not now!" Harry swore, looking around the room wildly. "Tonks, we need to contact Moody –"

"Oh, I'm sure by now he knows," Peeves interrupted, his eyes gleaming with malice, "but I think the damage may have already been done..."

"What do you gain from this, Peeves?" Harry snarled, pointing his wand straight at the laughing poltergeist. "What kind of sick pleasure do you get from this?"

Peeves paused, and a truly evil smile grew across his widening face.

"You know, Harry, I could ask you the same question."

Harry frowned, but Tonks suddenly felt a rush of horror – along with realization. No... oh god, no!

"You see, Harry," Peeves continued, dropping closer to Harry, "if you leave a backdoor, eventually, someone's gonna use it."

She knew her hair was darkening towards black, but she didn't care. Oh god, oh no, this can't be happening, this can't be happening!

Peeves finally stopped moving when he was an inch from Harry's wand.

"So, now I've just got to ask – between the science experiment and Miss Granger, who really gets you off?"

Then Peeves vanished into thin air, leaving Harry standing stock-still, his eyes suddenly glassy.

"Tonks." His voice was strangled. "Give a good speech – I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Harry, what the – HARRY!"

But it was already too late. The simulacrum froze – and then crumpled to the floor, utterly lifeless.

"MALFOY, WHAT THE -"

Malfoy wasn't wasting time focusing on Zabini, even as his Exploding Curse hit the door, blasting it to flaming tinder. His focus was on Potter, yanking his hand free and rising to his feet –

"Confringo!" Malfoy bellowed, slashing his wand violent. "Confringo, you fucking bastard, confringo, CONFRINGO!"

Potter dove for cover – but Malfoy's spells weren't aimed at Potter.

He heard the crack of breaking stone, and saw Granger's legs slump with freedom as she stirred feebly. Amazing she's still conscious –

A flurry of spells streaked past him, and Malfoy yanked his attention back to the fight. Potter was coming back, raising the wand.

"Traitor."

Hatred roared up inside him like a tidal wave, how his family had been treated like less than dirt, how he had lost his handsomeness by playing a decoy, how he had tortured fellow students –

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

There was a flash of bright green light, and Malfoy could hear the sounds of speeding death...

And then he saw Potter hit the floor, unmoving, the body abandoned and still as a corpse.

He felt himself zooming through space, towards a purplish glow...

His chair rocked back with a thud as the purple gem flashed, and Voldemort's eyes snapped open.

"My Lord!"

He watched vacantly as Bellatrix rushed forward, but his mind was focused on the inevitable.

Draco Malfoy has betrayed me. He even tried to kill me.

"Bellatrix," he said, mustering all of his calm as he rose to his feet, his muscles stiff from the long hours in the chair, "please gather Lucius and Narcissa, and bring them to me immediately. They have something they must answer for."

Bellatrix's eyes flashed with a mixture of shock and fear. "Did... did something go –"

"Potentially," Voldemort hissed. "Before you leave, have the Italians made their appearance?"

"The main delegate is currently waiting for you, my Lord."

"Bring him down," Voldemort said curtly. "This should not take long."

Bellatrix nodded, and then paused. "My Lord," she began slowly, licking her lips, "did the mission... did you –"

"Yes," Voldemort replied, allowing a note of triumph to creep into his voice. "Success."

Bellatrix smiled madly, and with a short bow, darted away. Voldemort bent and picked up the Book of Inversion and Duplex from the table and carefully eyed it.

"A valuable tome," he mused aloud, snapping the book shut as he fit it carefully into his bookcase. "I must make the time to utilize it further."

He heard heavy steps on the stairs, and he straightened as he moved back to his chair and folded his hands. Any moment now...

"My Lord," Bellatrix began, "Lord Abnigus of Naples."

The Italian man was clean-shaven, his grey hair plastered flat around his head beneath a large black hat. To Voldemort's immediate distaste, the man was enormously fat, and smelt as if he hadn't bathed in well over a week. And judging by his corpulence, he thought to himself, it wouldn't be hard to believe. Wearing heavy, violet robes, Lord Abnigus was a massive presence in the room – one that Voldemort did not find welcome in the slightest.

The Italian bowed shortly to Voldemort – a gesture Voldemort did not return. He didn't even rise from his seat.

The Italian flushed. "I would have thought," the man said haughtily in Italian, "that the great Lord Voldemort would have better manners."

"That would imply the great Lord Voldemort cares an iota about your presence here," Voldemort replied. "Bellatrix, your errand?"

Bellatrix gave the fat man a disdainful sneer before Disapparating, one the Italian seemed to completely ignore, his watery eyes focused completely on Voldemort.

"NO!"

Malfoy turned and ducked instinctively – and it saved his life, as an avalanche of desks they had used as a barricade flew straight at him. As it was, he stumbled as a few desks hit him hard across the head and shoulders, knocking him back –

He chanced a glance upward – and immediately rolled sideways, away from the curse. He kept moving, not wasting time to look back. One look had told him everything he needed to know.

Nott had lost his goddamn mind.

Malfoy kept moving, seizing his broom off the floor as he moved towards the window, nearly getting hit by Zabini's curse –

And then he got an idea, and without thinking, he acted.

"Accio camera!"

Nott screamed as the camera ripped itself from his hand and soared straight into Malfoy's grip.

"Draco, the camera," Zabini growled. "Don't compound your treason."

"Everyone will have heard the explosions," Malfoy said, forcing his voice to remain steady and keeping a firm grip on the broom and camera. "You might want to start running."

"Draco –"

Malfoy forced back the brief feeling of foreboding and regret – he had chosen a new side.

I'm sorry, Blaise.

"Goodbye."

And with a blur of curses exploding around him, Draco leapt on his broom and soared out the window into the bloodshot sky.

The first thing he noticed was the dust.

Harry shook his head and coughed as he pushed himself up. The room was thick with rubble and broken desks, and blood was sprayed haphazardly across the ground.

He heard hammering footsteps slowly fading – someone was running away...

He blinked twice and began to gingerly rise to his feet – and then he felt something sticky on his left hand. Sticky... and wet.

He looked down, and he felt bile rush to his mouth. His hand was soaked in blood and something else that he didn't quite recognize that smelt foul...

And then he saw her. She was lying limply on the ground, her robes in tatters around her, her panties shoved back...

And then Harry suddenly knew where his hand had been.

At that second, he suddenly remembered. He remembered scrambling up from the dust of the Shrieking Shack and sprinting down the tunnel. He remembered rushing into the school and racing up several flights of stairs. He remembered seeing Hermione.

He remembered hitting...

"Oh god," Harry whispered with growing horror, looking at his hand. "No... no, no, no, please –"

Hermione was stirring now, her motions stiff and halting as she sat up.

He remembered hitting across the face, trapping her in stone, stripping her –

Her liquid brown eyes met his, and Harry felt a rush of horror.

"Hermione, please... it wasn't me, you know it wasn't me, I swear it wasn't me –"

Her wand had fallen close, and her fingers wrapped around it.

"Hermione, you... you know I'd never do this to you!" Harry said desperately, choking back bile and tears. "Look, there's this magic called simulamancy – I, I used that, Voldemort must have –"

She staggered to her feet, holding her robes closed around her with one hand and her wand with the other. Her lips were open – the curse fusing them had faded – and Harry could see them trembling.

"Hermione, it was Voldemort, it wasn't me," Harry pleaded, his breathes coming in short gasps. "Hermione, you know I would never... would never..."

"Harry..."

The word came limp from her lips, and tears filled her eyes again. She staggered back, nearly tripping on the debris, but she recovered quickly.

"Hermione, stop... please, let me – Hermione!"

His anguished cry echoed uselessly in the room.

"My god... it, it wasn't me," Harry whispered brokenly, tears tracing tracks through the dust on his face as he stared down at his bloody hands. "It wasn't me..."

"I must confess," Voldemort began slowly in Italian, not bothering to meet the Italian's gaze, "that your presence here is... unexpected."

"You broke our pact!" Abnigus sputtered, glaring at Voldemort. "You utilized the magic we gave you for dark purposes!"

"I do not believe you are fit to judge my purposes," Voldemort replied, his eyes narrowing at the Italian's gall. "We had an agreement."

"That you broke!"

"Then name your price, if this is such an issue for you," Voldemort said exasperatedly. "I would be willing to pay it."

"Such magic," Abnigus said loudly, "is not bought with gold!"

Voldemort was rapidly growing tired of the Italian's game, and he rose to his full height, looking down on the foul-smelling man. "And who are you," he said in a low voice, "to make such demands, in my house?"

"No demands will be made," Abnigus said, his expression suddenly very smug. "For as you have broken your bargain, we will rescind ours."

Voldemort paused. "What did you say?"

"Our agents have brought down the barrier you have erected around the Black residence," Abnigus continued, rising to his own feet with shocking grace, "and the remaining magic you chose to weave around the Ministry." Abnigus' watery eyes sparkled with a strange confidence. "Your spells are broken."

He just said those words in English, Voldemort thought suddenly, his hand sliding to his wand. He is more than he appears –

"And who are you," he repeated, "to defy Lord Voldemort with such bravado?"

It came out of nowhere, but Voldemort was faster. His shield blocked enough of the light, and he squinted at the Italian, who seemed to be shifting beneath his eyes...

"I know that smell."

Voldemort froze – the voice was distorted, but it sounded familiar.

"So you've taken action at last."

The light wasn't fading, but he could see the slimming outline, rimmed in fire, an unearthly sound beginning to ring through the air...

"And I suspect, given your competence, you were successful... I see the purpose of your trap, attempting to keep me incapacitated for so long..."

"Who are you?" Voldemort growled. "Who are you?"

And then the light faded, and he could see – and his heart nearly froze inside his chest.

Violet robes and a shimmering cape of a million colours. A pointed hat. Buckled boots made of dark, gleaming dragonhide.

And a pair of half-moon spectacles set on a crooked nose, over sparkling blue eyes blazing with fury.

It can't be.

"I will not kill you here, but there are things far, far worse than death, Tom," Albus Dumbledore said in a low voice, filled with a controlled anger unlike anything Voldemort had ever heard before.

He raised his wand and pointed it at Voldemort's head. "And I believe it's about time you experienced them."

Author's Notes: well, much to my surprise, there wasn't an exorbitant amount of negative feedback for the last chapter. Huh. Well, in any case, as promised, here's the next chapter, where shit REALLY begins to hit the fan. As always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

-Silens

Her breathing was shallow and laboured. He could hear the blood beginning to fill her lungs – the splinching had done internal damage, and even though the Healers were working fast, he knew the chances weren't good.

"Is she..." Kemester began, taking an unsteady breath.

"It will be hit-and-miss for a few more hours, but she should pull through," the nearest Healer assured him, before turning back to Rita Skeeter's unconscious body and raising his wand.

Kemester exhaled slowly and pulled himself to his feet. He took a few heavy steps towards the door and slipped into the sterile hallway, his mind sluggishly beginning to work.

He had only drifted off for an hour or two in the operating room, but the sleep had been restless, and the dreams were only getting worse. He couldn't stop thinking, trying to piece together the myriad pieces of the puzzle.

Willard Parkinson was waiting for her in her room, and Cuffe was there as well – but a few words from Rita won't prove it to anyone but me... but how did they get keys to Rita's room? The only people who would have had keys would have been Skeeter and...

He froze, and his palm banged against the wall as he staggered, the sound echoing loudly down the hall.

The traitor in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement... he's there, in Bonaccord Hall, and he went after Rita instead of any other delegates or Ministry officials because...

And then the piece slowly slid into place. He had been around Rita enough in recent days to know that she had a keen eye for detail – and that she didn't care who her articles infuriated. She would print anything...

"They were trying to stop her," he muttered, staggering a little further down the hall, fighting to regain his equilibrium as his head spun from lack of sleep and racing thoughts. "Trying... trying to prevent her from reporting on the conference..."

Well, that makes your role clear enough.

He took a ragged breath and put a hand to his forehead. Something big was going to happen – something that people needed to hear...

"And whoever thought," he whispered, "that this would be my job?"

He began walking quickly, racing towards the stairs. First, he would have to search Rita's room, find whatever notes and that damned Quick-Quotes Quill of hers. And then the conference chamber.

And time's running out.

Voldemort raised his wand a little higher, and he let a sneer creep onto his face to mask the strange feeling rising in his gut. He attributed it to uncertainty of his enemy's plan, and the sooner he could divine it, the sooner he could counter.

"You're taking a great risk, Dumbledore," he began in a low voice as he kept his gaze fixed on the old Headmaster. "Appearing alone, in my place of power, my sanctum, with my Death Eaters at my beck and call?"

The edges of Dumbledore's mouth began to tip upwards into a tiny grin. "Please do, Tom – I would have no qualms delivering them to a location they would find most unpleasant."

"Azkaban is gone, Dumbledore." He left out a short bark of a laugh of disdain as he sidestepped towards one of the many piles of books strewn around the room. He had to keep Dumbledore talking...

Dumbledore's eyes hardened, and Voldemort barely deflected the curse upwards into the ceiling. Sparks exploded from the sizzling curse dancing across the charring stonework, and he didn't waste any time. With barely a flick of his wand, two stacks of books seemed to vanish into thin air.

"You killed many good men with your attack that day, Tom," Dumbledore said softly, "but did you think there would not be a reckoning, that I would not know?" Without moving his wand, a trio of curses erupted from the tip of his wand. These Voldemort deflected into the walls, but he couldn't help feel that Dumbledore was holding something back, that he was waiting for something.

"I managed to escape your trap – a very interesting concept, Tom, and one that I studied at length – and instead of revealing myself, I decided that England was best without me." Dumbledore flicked his wand, but Voldemort managed to counter the curse before it even crossed the room. "So I took care of some international issues..."

A sudden cold feeling shot down Voldemort's back. "You went to Italy."

"It was easy enough," Dumbledore replied simply, Disapparating effortlessly out of the way of Voldemort's sudden curse, which drilled into the wall with an agonized screech of metal on stone – which gave Voldemort the second he needed to send away another pile of books. "The Italians were not happy with your manipulations there, and your emissaries are 'sleeping with the fishes', as it is." The old headmaster cocked his head sideways with thought. "A shame you never did see that Muggle film..."

A tremor struck the room, and Voldemort tensed to counter the spell, but Dumbledore didn't even seem to react as thin rivulets of dust drifted down.

That wasn't a spell, he suddenly realized. Something's coming...

"And then I just... tidied things up, as it were," Dumbledore said calmly, another flurry of spells erupting from his wand – but this time,

Voldemort's deflection wasn't nearly as quick, and he winced as his stone table erupted in bluebell flames. "Paid a few debts, made a few bargains... and then I just needed you to accept my invitation to return."

"A return too late, Dumbledore," Voldemort hissed, a silent incantation rendering his lungs impervious to the smoke, which he ignited into a cloud of embers with a sudden slash of his wand. "Too late for your 'Boy-Who-Lived'."

Dumbledore's eyes flashed, and the embers in the cloud abruptly died – and Voldemort didn't waste any time.

"Avada Kedavra!"

But Dumbledore Disapparated again, and Voldemort could only raise a shimmering silvery shield in time to deflect the jet of fluid that seemingly erupted out of nowhere.

Another tremor struck the room, and Voldemort gritted his teeth as a stack of books toppled to the floor. Without another word, he seized The Book of Inversion and Duplex and whirled –

Only to barely deflect a helix of blue and green that struck his shield with the sound of shattering bones.

"You've targeted Harry time and time again," Dumbledore said grimly, "and yet he perseveres. You've heard the Prophecy, Tom – you know how it must end."

"He may have the power to defeat me," Voldemort hissed, tucking the book into his robes, "but the spirit is something different entirely. I've broken many spirits before, Dumbledore – and a man's endurance is only finite."

His lipless face twisted into a smile. "As are the number of his loved ones."

"Harry... Harry, come on, wake up!" Tonks hissed, shaking the simulacrum on the floor as panic filled her gut. "Harry, get back here, come on..."

"Miss Vuneren, it's time."

Tonks snapped her eyes up even as the simulacrum's head lolled. "Son of a bitch!"

Larshall peeked inside, and his eyes went wide as he rushed over. "Oh Merlin, what happened? Is she –"

"She's not moving!" Tonks said, her voice breaking slightly as she shook the simulacrum harder. "Goddamn it, Clarissa, wake up –"

"Look, you need to get out there, Miss Vuneren," Larshall said quickly, kneeling and putting two fingers to the simulacrum's throat. "No pulse... you have any idea –"

"If I knew, do you think I'd be shaking her?" Tonks lied with an angry glare, fighting to regain control. Okay, so you have to do this on your own... that's not a problem, you know everything as well as Harry does. "Mr. Larshall, can you take her back to her room – maybe it's a Draught of Living Death that she accidentally ingested –"

"I'll see what I can do," Larshall promised hastily, taking the lifeless simulacrum in his arms and struggling to his feet. "You just get out there, hurry!"

Tonks stood up quickly – nearly tripping in her heels – and took a deep breath. I can do this.

She stepped through the doors, and the flashes from dozens of cameras nearly blinded her. All around her, she could hear clicks and shouted questions, but nobody approached her as she regained her senses and saw the Conference Chamber for the very first time.

The room was enormous – she guessed that a small Quidditch pitch could fit beneath the domed roof of the building. All around the arena-like oval room were desks, haphazardly scattered to accommodate

the entourages of the delegates and the press. Tonks had stepped out onto an upper balcony of sorts, with a stairwell down to a podium, opposite a massive chair draped in purple, where Nathan Cassane was rising to his feet and clapping his hands.

The sound of applause – a sound she certainly hadn't expected, was not only from Cassane. Around the room, dozens of hands burst into clapping, and Tonks felt a heady rush as she walked to her podium.

It was going to happen. They were going to win.

She touched her wand to her throat, and silently cast the Amplification Charm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, honoured members of the International Confederation of Wizards, my name is Nymphadora Vuneren of the legal firm Desdame & Vuneren, and I'm here to present –"

Her spell suddenly cut out. She frowned, and tapped her wand to her throat. Sonorus. "I'm here to present –"

"A cavalcade of lies?"

The voice made Tonks' blood run cold, and her gaze snapped to the source, who was stepping down from England's desk – England's desk – and steadily proceeding towards the floor, a cruel smile on his handsome face.

Cassane rose to his feet, his wand already in his hands as his brown eyes burned with sudden anger. "Confederation guards, Aurors! Arrest him –"

"Belay that!"

Oh, you've got to be kidding me.

Cornelius Fudge took a deep breath as the entire hall broke into angry murmurs at his outburst. "I apologize for the outburst in such august company, but I have guaranteed protection for Willard

Parkinson of Parkinson & Baddock, and encourage the Confederation to hear his testimony –"

"Your request is denied, Minister," Cassane interrupted, his voice abruptly cold. "Under the codicil of conduct for the Confederation, Mr. Parkinson is barred from testimony and is under arrest, due to his complicit actions in the attempted attack last night -"

"He is a suspect and charged with nothing," Fudge countered heatedly. "No evidence has been compiled for his arrest, and thus, the codicil cannot be invoked. He is not a war criminal, and under Confederation law, he is allowed to present arguments to counter Miss Vuneren's, particularly in this call to war."

That got a reaction, and Tonks felt a chill feeling in her gut as the murmurs grew louder. It was a call to war, and while Voldemort had attacked international targets in the First War, she knew it would be a hard sell.

"Are these arguments that will be presented on behalf of the Ministry for Magic?" Cassane asked slowly, daggers in his gaze as he glared at Fudge.

Maybe it was the long distance away from each other, but Fudge only quivered for a few seconds before returning the glare in full force. "It is simply a second measured opinion, provided for balance and not sponsored by the Ministry."

Which means Parkinson has something on you and has been running around freely, Tonks thought viciously. Just perfect, me versus Voldemort's best lawyer, who we can't even arrest. She barely restrained a snort at the irony. Where the hell are nutcases like Kemester when you need them?

Cassane's hands were clenched tight with fury, but Tonks knew that he could do nothing to stop Parkinson from taking a place at a podium perpendicular to his and Tonks'. "Very... very well, then. Miss Vuneren, you may begin."

It was a fairly innocuous sports store, filled with jerseys and sportswear, hats and shoes and footballs, but the newest arrival, wearing a tattered shirt and stained slacks, didn't quite care about any of that at the moment. His eyes were only on the back counter, where an unshaven, potbellied man wearing a battered old cap was carefully rearranging a selection of caps on a shelf on the back wall.

The new arrival only sighed as he approached the counter and tapped the tiny bell.

"Shop's closed."

"Not at this hour in the morning, it's not," the man replied quietly, his hand slipping to his pants to grasp his wand. "I'd like to see the owner."

The man behind the counter froze. "Shop's –"

"Look, do we have to play this game?" the new arrival cut in, irritation in his voice. "The shop's empty, Sturgis – let's talk."

The man behind the counter reacted this time – he bolted for the back door.

But Remus Lupin was faster. Vaulting over the counter, he hit Sturgis soundly in the back with a silent Stunning Spell. Another wave of his wand dimmed the bright lights, locked the front door, and flipped the sign on the door to 'Closed'.

"And here I thought this was going to be easy," Remus muttered, kneeling next to Sturgis. "Enervate."

Sturgis' eyes fluttered open – and immediately widened with fear. "Help –"

"Would you relax?" Remus said exasperatedly, tapping the bill of Sturgis' faded cap with his wand. "It's me, Sturgis, Remus."

"How do I know it's you?" Sturgis retorted, his own hand creeping to his pocket.

"Because you, Sirius, and I once exchanged drinks at the Three Broomsticks, where you talked about where you got that cap," Remus replied wearily, lowering his wand. "You went to America – a Muggle ball game of some kind..."

"Baseball," Sturgis replied defensively. "It was in Boston – they were playing Detroit, and I got the hat at the game."

"Well, Moody always thought it looked stupid," Remus finished tiredly, extending a hand and pulling Sturgis to his feet. "It was distinctive, it gave you away –"

"Yet none of You-Know-Who's people are ever going to go looking in a Muggle sports store in Manchester for the Order," Sturgis replied with a weak smile. "Perfect place to hide. Sorry that I jumped, Remus... it's been –"

"Scary, I know," Remus replied, taking a deep breath as he pushed open the door to the cluttered and chemical-smelling backroom. "Talk in here?"

"Sure, but Remus, you don't understand." Sturgis hastily shut the door behind Remus and locked it with a shaky tap of his wand. "I just got out of Azkaban – escaped getting caught by the Ministry in the chaos, and I've been lying low since." He pulled his hat off and shook out his straw-coloured hair. "Things are getting crazy out there."

"Tell me about it," Remus said quietly, sitting down at the tiny table shoved against a wall filled with boxes. "I just escaped myself."

"From what?"

Remus shook his head. "Not Azkaban, but still pretty hellish. Have you had any contact with the wizarding world at all?"

"That's what I've been trying to avoid, Remus!" Sturgis exclaimed anxiously, with a nervous glance at the door. "I've been hiding out here – the Death Eaters never found me before."

"And why fix what isn't broke, right?"

Sturgis nodded as he sat down opposite Remus. "Yeah. So why are you here?"

Remus took a deep breath – this could get awkward. "I need to know why you went to Azkaban." He took another unsteady breath. "Why you killed Laertes Rawling."

Sturgis went pale, and threw another frightened glance at the door. "Look, you have to understand, I was under the Imperius –"

"You said Dumbledore ordered you to do it," Remus said grimly, "and if that's all it is –"

"No, Dumbledore didn't tell me to kill him!" Sturgis exclaimed quickly. "I'm a better Healer than fighter, Remus, you know that –"

"Then what were you doing in the Department of Mysteries that you would get anywhere near Rawling?" Remus replied calmly, folding his hands. "You'd have to be close to kill him – and from what I heard, they found his body in the Department itself, so that must mean you got inside –"

"I told you, I was under the Imperius, Remus –"

"What I want to know," Remus pursued, "is how you, of all people, got that close to him."

Sturgis swallowed hard. "Well... look, Laertes was the Order contact –"

"I know," Remus said coolly. "So why were you talking with him?"

"He was doing research on some weird stuff I didn't understand in the Department of Mysteries," Sturgis said, his voice getting quieter and faster as he leaned close. "Dumbledore was interested, and he wanted the two of us to relay information back to the Order. But then one day, I was crossing the Atrium and everything went... fuzzy," he finished lamely.

"Imperius," Remus guessed.

"When everything was clear again, I was sitting in a frigid Azkaban cell." Sturgis shivered. "You can't even imagine –"

"Do you know who cast the curse on you?" Remus whispered. "Did you see his face, recognize his voice?"

Sturgis rubbed his jaw and looked sick. "Remus..."

"Sturgis, I need this information." He leaned closer and fixed Sturgis with a steady stare. "If we want to track down who this guy is – one more piece in this bloody puzzle – I need his name."

"You don't understand, Remus," Sturgis muttered nervously, his hands shaking. "I hear his voice at night, when I'm sleeping... I don't know if he's still watching me, or if the curse is lifted properly –"

Remus fought back a sigh of frustration. He wasn't surprised at Sturgis' reaction – people placed under the Imperius Curse tended to have this sort of reactionary paranoia – and Remus really couldn't blame them either. "It's okay, Sturgis, you can trust me."

Sturgis swallowed hard. He pulled a scrap of paper and a Muggle pen from the edge of the desk and hastily scratched down two letters before pushing the paper to Remus.

He studied the scribbled letters for a few seconds before frowning. "R.L...these are my initials, Sturgis."

"Not you," Sturgis whispered. "He's hiding in plain sight."

"He should be here by now."

His wife looked up from her mug of hot tea. Her pale cheeks were pink with the chill wind, which had somehow found a way to creep inside the tiny gardener's shack – one of the last buildings the Malfoys owned in England.

The goblins got most of it, Lucius thought savagely as he peered out the tiny fogged window. Nearly all of it, but they didn't get us... they didn't get –

"Lucius, I'm cold."

His eyes snapped to his wife, and without thinking, he pulled off the fur cloak he was wearing and wrapped it snugly around her shoulders. "We won't be waiting long, Cissy. Only until Draco gets here."

He left the thoughts in both their heads unspoken as he took another ragged breath and peered out the window again –

And froze. Someone was coming.

"Cissy –"

She understood immediately. She carefully set down her teacup on a barrel, and drew her wand as she sidled into the shadows. Lucius's fingers tightened on his cane as he clenched his jaw, the figure slowly coming into view.

"Cissy, it's Antonin."

"Can we trust him?"

"If we don't let him in, there'll be a fight," Lucius said grimly, pulling his wand free. "Disillusion yourself and keep quiet – if he makes a move..."

Narcissa swallowed hard, the colour in her cheeks fading away as she nodded quickly. She tapped herself on her head, and Lucius watched as the charm took hold.

A few seconds later, he heard the muffled rap of gloved knuckles on the door.

Show time.

A wave of his wand unlocked the door and shoved it open, and immediately Lucius regretted the decision as the damp freezing wind rushed inside with a shrill whistle.

A whistle that was cut off a second later, as Antonin Dolohov offhandedly kicked shut the door behind him.

The Death Eater rubbed his dark goatee with thought as he scanned the tiny shed. "How the mighty have fallen."

"If you've come to taunt me, Antonin," Lucius said softly, an edge in his voice, "you can leave."

"Oh, Lucius, you know that's not going to happen," Dolohov replied, leaning against the door with a cheerful smile on his face as he effortlessly twirled his wand.

Lucius gritted his teeth – he knew how lethal Dolohov could be. "You look... well."

"Really?" Dolohov's eyes lit up as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Thanks, Lucius, that means a lot – 'cause you look..." He tapped his chin. "What's the right word for it... ah, yes, desperate."

He forced back the hot indignation and rage in his gut as he glared balefully at the smiling Death Eater. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

"Really." Dolohov's voice was deadpan. "Because I think if I shut up, you're just going to keep on talking."

"Either tell me why you're here," Malfoy hissed, "or get out."

"Why?" Dolohov replied lightly, a note of mocking innocence in his voice as he leaned against the door. "Got somewhere to be, someone to do?"

Lucius didn't respond to Dolohov's taunt – the man wasn't deserving of it. But despite the silence, a slow grin was growing wider and wider on the other man's face.

"So it's tonight," he said softly. "Tonight, you're going to start your little journey... and you're only waiting for Draco – by the way, Narcissa, if you're going to use that charm, you should really stop moving, I can see you fidgeting over there –"

For the first time, real fear flooded up into Lucius' stomach as Narcissa muttered the counter-charm and stepped out of the shadow next Lucius. Her shaking hand slipped into his.

"Antonin," she began slowly, fighting to retain control, "if you know what we're doing, why are you here?"

"Because – and I honestly can't even believe I'm saying this," Dolohov replied with a slow, disbelieving shake of his head, "but I'm going to try to talk you out of it."

Lucius and Narcissa exchanged glances – it could well be all a stalling tactic for other Death Eaters to swoop in. But they still needed to wait for Draco...

Lucius took a deep breath. "Talk fast."

"You think the Dark Lord is insane," Dolohov said bluntly. "You think your family has been slighted time and time again, offered as scapegoats because, let's face it, you keep screwing up. Lucius, you didn't kill Castellan Zabini, and while your little wizarding bank scheme managed to bilk Potter out of his gold, you exposed yourself and caused a hell of a lot of chaos to break out in the meantime. And at Hogwarts, your son behaves like a fool and enjoys a nice scrub to remove all that excess skin from his face."

"And your point?" Lucius growled, his wand beginning to rise.

"Only that everything that's happened to you," Dolohov continued, a smirk growing on his face, "isn't because the Dark Lord has it in for you, or because he enjoys your suffering. To tell you the truth, I don't even think he cares about your suffering, or much about your family at all, beyond what you can do for him."

"Again, what's your point?"

Dolohov shrugged. "Simply that you're not thinking about this rationally. That you haven't considered all of your options. That you haven't even attempted to re-establish your usefulness and regain the attention and favour of the Dark Lord."

His eyes narrowed. "But if you run... oh, he'll know. All of that attention you wanted will fall right back on you – and make no mistake, Lucius, he will find you. He's good at that, you know."

The presentation had been going smoothly, but in her gut, Tonks still felt a quiver of unease.

The crowd had been very quiet staring down at her podium, only murmuring upon the mention of names or recent events, or at a particular magical image she projected with a wave of her wand. From the faces she could make out in the crowd, she could detect some interest, at least... but was it enough? Would it be enough to compel them to act, to overrule Fudge's insane policy and force something?

Parkinson had been silent throughout the whole presentation – she knew that his snide remarks could have derailed her speech into an argument very quickly – but she didn't like the look in his eye. He's got something up his sleeve, I can feel it...

But even without Parkinson's interference or comments, she knew she had to change her tactics. I'm not getting to them, she thought with frustration.

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the International Confederation of Wizards, I come before you today not just to deliver a warning," Tonks continued, taking a deep breath, "but a call to action. A resounding warning that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned and is active once again. We all learned from the war fourteen years ago that he will not stop at conquest of England and our Ministry." She glanced at Cassane. "No, he has a much wider grasp, and his appetite for power is insatiable."

Cassane nodded with approval, and Tonks turned to look up at the audience again. "So I plead for you to come to our aid, and stand firm with us. This will not remain a national issue for much longer. He has already destroyed Azkaban and freed the majority of his old army. It won't be long before he'll turn his eyes to your shores."

Tonks closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath that she knew the amplification charm would only render all the more theatrical. "We need to stop him now, and with the depletion of our Department of Magical Law Enforcement, we would greatly appreciate your aid. If we move quickly, we can save lives, end the insanity of the past few months." She clenched a hand into a fist. "Bring him down before... before he kills again."

She exhaled slowly and glanced at Cassane. "I open to questioning from the delegates, if permitted?"

"Permission granted," Cassane replied softly, his eyes not leaving her. "Questions may now be directed at Nymphadora Vuneren."

There was an immediate commotion as the reporters lining the aisles began shouting down comments that were only barely distinguishable, but the noise immediately quieted as the American delegate, a military-looking man, rose to his feet.

"This 'Dark Lord'," the American began, his even voice tempered with grave concern, "I have heard only pieces about him, most frustratingly incomplete."

And you can thank the bloody Ministry for that, Tonks thought bitterly to herself. They didn't want to look bad, so they tried to cover everything up, make everything look so damn dandy that everyone else didn't know the whole truth...

"...but I hear the sincerity of your claims." The delegate crossed his arms over his broad chest. "How strong is he?"

Tonks grimaced. "The only man he ever feared was Dumbledore – and right now, nobody knows where he is."

There were unsettled murmurs at that, as the German delegate, a tanned man with a thick goatee, rose to his feet and stared at her through suspicious, squinty eyes.

"I feel that there has been a very real problem with this discussion – namely the role of the goblins in all of this." The man's thick German accent made the words seem all the more grating as the delegate looked to glare daggers at Fudge. "I call upon the English Minister for Magic to address this issue, considering the goblin problem in the past few months started here."

Tonks could hardly suppress a groan of exasperation. She should have expected this to come up.

Fudge cleared his throat as he stood, his best expression of haughty disdain on his face. "The goblin problem has been dealt with, Delegate Vernz."

"Maybe here, but not across the rest of the world," the German replied indignantly. "What peace treaty you brokered with them hasn't exactly carried over, and I cannot help but detect that you know more than you're telling about this."

Fudge shifted uncomfortably. "I have been very plain in outlining the deals we have made with the goblins –"

"To whom, exactly?" the Canadian delegate, an ugly blond woman with a permanent scowl etched on her face, asked with a disgusted expression. "Certainly not to any of us, out in the 'hinterland', where we might not have the facilities in place to negotiate cleanly with the goblins and thus our people are dying!"

Fudge reddened with growing anger. "I made it very clear to all of our neighbors –"

"Certainly not to us," the Irish delegate, a dark-haired swarthy-looking man, shouted, "and we're your closest of neighbours! What are ye trying to pull here, Fudge, bringing back this 'Ye-Know-Who' shit again –"

"Let me make this very clear," Fudge yelled, his voice immediately cutting through the erupting din, "I did not sponsor this... this lawyer to come here and make a statement today!"

"Then who did?" the American delegate asked sternly.

"I did."

The hall immediately quieted, as Cassane rose to his feet and stepped forward, his dark robes fluttering around him as he stared out at the audience.

"I did," Cassane repeated, his eyes sweeping the room. "I was the one who called Ms. Vuneren in here today, because I believe her claims. I believe that she brings a horrifying truth to light that we must act upon." He pointed out at the crowd. "Now, you may not have had evidence enough when Dumbledore came before you and delivered his speech, professing You-Know-Who was back – apparently, you didn't want to take the word of the most powerful wizard in the world!"

There was a rather awkward silence at that. Someone coughed – a cough that Tonks found immediately familiar.

Oh no.

"So he was asked politely to resign for spreading such 'ludicrous tales'," Cassane continued scathingly, now turning his gaze at Fudge. To Tonks' surprise, there was no anger in his expression – only coldness. "By his own government, nonetheless. But now you have heard the tale and you have heard the evidence and you know the implications of what will happen if this monster and his band of terrorists are not stopped." His gaze finally stopped at Tonks. "So I vouch for this woman, and I have first-hand experience to prove that her arguments are indeed true. And given the events of the past few months and my well-publicized quest to prove the truth, that is all you should need."

The silence was eerie as Cassane stared out at the audience, daring them to ask an accusing question or shout down a snide comment.

But none said a word, and Tonks took a deep breath...

"Except..."

Tonks closed her eyes. And here I thought we almost had it. Fuck.

Cassane rounded on Willard Parkinson in an instant. "Except what, Mr. Parkinson?"

"Except, as an excellent lawyer, I can't just take your truth at face value," Parkinson replied lightly, scratching the underside of his chin. "I mean, I know your history."

Cassane's face hardened, but he didn't say a word.

"I mean, here is a man – an incredibly gifted and wealthy wizard, who didn't need to have a thing to do with us – who decided to take his own action against You-Know-Who during the war. Not because of any altruistic endeavours or a desire to see justice." Parkinson's eyes gleamed as he flashed his pearly white teeth in a large smile. "No, you see, Nathan Cassane started fighting because he was bored."

"And I paid the price for any frivolous stupidity," Cassane said softly, stepping closer, his eyes burning with well-contained anger. "As I'm sure you well know, Parkinson, considering you tended to represent the murderers I caught."

Parkinson waved a hand airily. "Every man deserves a fair trial – I was doing my job, Supreme Mugwump Cassane, you know that. And of course, I do not disparage what you have done – although I have to ask what exactly you were doing at the darkest points of the war, when the Ministry and the people you profess to protect needed you the most."

"If I recall correctly, I was in a coma," Cassane growled.

"And then you proceeded to... what?" Parkinson raised his hands with mock helplessness. "I'm sorry, Supreme Mugwump, but you didn't enact any preventative measures, to ensure You-Know-Who or his followers wouldn't come back? In fact, let's jump ahead – where

were you when the Ministry was bombed, or when Gringotts was attacked?" Parkinson's eyes gleamed. "How do we have any evidence at all that you care so much, when you weren't even at Azkaban, fighting to save all those brave witches and wizards who died trying to protect it?"

Tonks' heartbeat pounded in her chest. Oh no, this isn't happening... the delegates can't be buying this garbage he's shilling, they can't believe –

"Witches and wizards of the Wizengamot," Parkinson continued, looking out the crowd, "you have sold a bill of goods. The Ministry does not support Mr. Cassane's position, because it is wrong. It is not simply fear he is trying to evoke in you – it was warmongering, pure and simple. He is trying to incite you to join in a war that does not exist, a war that ended fourteen long years ago." Parkinson shook his head sadly. "A old warhorse, long away from the battlefield, wanting to bring back the glory days."

Cassane trembled with fury, and Tonks almost involuntarily took a step back at the expression of pure rage on his face. "I lived those 'glory days', you rat bastard, do you honestly think I would want to relive –"

"So he hires this duplicitous shill of a lawyer," Parkinson continued, completely ignoring Cassane and talking right over him, his amplification spell booming across the room. "A woman without a shred of legal credentials or history from a partnership that cannot be traced or even proven to exist! A woman who has suspected ties to the goblins who have been stirring up rebellion around the globe, to destabilize our Ministry, on this man's mad direction –"

"LIAR!"

The ragged shout was amplified so loud and so roughly that it shook a thin trail of dust from the ceiling. Delegates and reporters groaned, looking wildly around the room for the source of the shout, finally landing on a man who had shoved the doors of the chamber wide open and was shoving his way through the growing crowd as quickly as he could move.

Cassane's eyes widened. Parkinson's handsome face twisted into a terrible expression.

Tonks only put her hand to her mouth as a rush of emotions surged through her head. Shock, horror, confusion, even elation... she couldn't believe it. She just couldn't believe it.

Her thoughts finally crystallized into something she could understand, and she shook her head. Harry's never going to believe this.

"Stop that man!" Fudge roared.

"Who is he?" the American delegate bellowed. "I want his name, I've seen him before –"

The man stopped in mid-walk, his craggy scarred face illuminated in the harsh white light of the chamber, his eyes alight with conviction. That wasn't new – conviction was not an unfamiliar emotion to the man, Tonks guessed – but for the first time, she felt a thrill in her gut.

Guess we managed to convince somebody after all. I just can't believe it's him.

"My name," the man said, his ragged voice echoing in the hall, "is Dmitri Kemester, son of former Wizengamot judge Claudius Kemester, ranking Hit Wizard."

His eyes focused on Parkinson, and narrowed with absolute hatred. "And for the crimes of obstruction of justice, multiple accounts of theft and violation of legal and financial procedure, the attempted murders of Rita Skeeter and Cornelius Fudge, and high treason against the Wizengamot and Ministry for Magic, YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!"

Lucius gritted his teeth. "The Dark Lord is occupied with other –"

His voice was cut off by Dolohov's raucous laugh. "Are you serious? Do you think that he won't bother to pursue you because he's distracted?"

"You said he doesn't care about us," Narcissa said suddenly, attempting to draw herself up and maintain a vestige of dignity. "Why would he care if we leave?"

Dolohov stopped laughing, and eyed her incredulously. "Really, Narcissa, you're smarter than this. You and your blissfully ignorant moron of a husband serve him – until he takes over, there isn't exactly a retirement date."

"He would lose nothing by our departure –"

"Wrong." Dolohov leaned against the door. "And frankly, you should be smart enough to see why, Cissy. And on that note, have you informed your sister about this?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Knowing her, she might consider your decision a tad unwise."

He glanced towards the window. "Lucius, I don't recognize the colours your protective enchantments are giving off, but I suspect somebody might be coming closer to your little ruin in the countryside here."

"Draco," Lucius whispered, his eyes lighting up as he moved towards the door – the door Dolohov was blocking. "Out of my way, Antonin, there isn't much time."

"And you still haven't listened to me," Dolohov said coolly, crossing his arms over his chest and not moving an inch from his position. "Why is that?"

"Oh, for the love of –"

Dolohov raised a warning finger as Lucius' wand rose. "Lucius, I'm warning you –"

But Lucius wasn't listening – he didn't want to listen, he didn't need to listen to him. He doesn't know, he thought bitterly as he shoved past Dolohov – who didn't bother to stop him – and pushed the door open, stepping out into the snow.

Draco was coming in too fast, and he dropped into a sharp dive as he streaked towards the cottage, barely holding onto the slick wet wood of his Nimbus. Lucius could see his son gritting his teeth, trying to stop –

"Immobulus."

Draco abruptly froze in mid-air, his broom streaking out from beneath his hands and burying itself to a stop in the snow. Twigs scattered from the broom's impact as Draco collapsed unceremoniously in the snow, hurriedly pulling his cloak around him.

"You're welcome," Dolohov muttered to himself.

Lucius ignored the other man as he grabbed his son by the shoulders, forcing himself to stare at Draco's scarred face. Despite himself, he felt his gut burn with disgust and growing rage at the indignity of it all. How dare Potter do this to us – how dare he –

"Were you followed?" he said in a low voice.

Draco nodded quickly, wiping snow from his hair. "Blaise Zabini was behind me. He fell back pretty quickly, he's only flying a Comet, but he knows where I'm going, he knows I'm coming here –"

"We'll be long gone," Lucius said curtly, turning back towards the shack. "Narcissa, time to go."

Draco looked past his father to see Narcissa emerging from the shack, pulling her furred cloak tighter around her – and then he saw the shadowy figure right behind her.

"Father, why is Dolohov –"

"He's irrelevant right now," Lucius muttered. "Come on, we have a Portkey to catch –"

"I don't suppose," Dolohov called out loudly, lazily stepping out of the shack, "that you'd be any more amenable to my pleas for you to stay behind."

Lucius could see the muscles tightening in Draco's jaw and for the first time, noticed a large camera slung around his son's neck. What on earth –

"I'd leave right now even if my father was against it," Draco said, his voice deadly quiet as his hand slipped to his wand. "What I saw... what the Dark Lord made us do –"

Dolohov's eyes narrowed, and his wand rose again. Lucius' hand plunged for his own wand –

"Accio camera!"

The flimsy strap around Draco's neck broke, and before he could grab it, the camera soared through the air – and Dolohov caught it easily, the flash breaking off in his hand.

"On here?"

Draco's eyes widened with panic. "Mr. Dolohov –"

But Dolohov wasn't listening. He only looked at Lucius with an exasperated expression. "Who would have thought your son would have had such humble dreams –"

"Mr. Dolohov, the camera, please," Draco whispered, and Lucius could hear the tremor in his son's voice. "I need –"

"I think I'll just hold onto it for now," Dolohov said, a cruel smile growing on his face. "Consider it the duty for crossing the border."

"Draco, is that –"

"Yes, Father." Draco took a ragged breath. "That's it."

And that means Draco's mission at Hogwarts is complete, Lucius thought with a sudden chill racing down his spine. And that means...

"You say that's a duty?" he asked aloud.

Dolohov's eyes narrowed. "A bargain, Lucius?"

"You take the camera and let us pass unscathed," Lucius said quickly. "You don't tell the Dark Lord where we're going, or even how we left. In return..." He clenched his fist against the surprising bile in his mouth. "In return, you can have that."

"Father –"

"Silence, Draco," Lucius snapped. "Do we have a deal, Dolohov?"

Dolohov studied the camera for a long few seconds, periodically glancing at Draco with a thoughtful expression. Lucius held his breath...

"Interesting pictures on here?"

A muscle was twitching in Draco's cheek. "Not pleasant ones."

Dolohov raised an eyebrow. "Ah." He glanced down at the camera and then carefully tucked it into a pocket that looked far too small to contain it. "Fine by me."

"What are you going to do with—"

Dolohov smirked. "What do you think?"

The laboratory was in ruins and the tremors had begun to intensify, but neither of them had given quarter – and it wasn't expected.

"My Death Eaters are coming, Dumbledore," Voldemort whispered, glancing again at the thick rivulets of dust falling from the ceiling. "Any moment now, you will be outnumbered twenty-to-one."

But Dumbledore only gave a small, infuriating smile. "Let them come, Tom – I think I am adequately prepared."

The old man's wand began darting, and Voldemort's hasty shield charm rung as a hailstorm of pinkish curses struck it, filling the room with even more acrid smoke as the spells sizzled away into the walls.

"Avada Ked-"

But Dumbledore had already vanished in a flash of phoenix fire, somehow appearing in three different locations around the laboratory, each now raising a wand to attack.

Voldemort snarled, and his wand spat lightning, easily scything through the illusions and ricocheting off Dumbledore's lazy Shield Charm. "Are you some common Muggle magician, Dumbledore? Stooping to paltry illusions that any street urchin could see through?"

"I like Muggle magic," Dumbledore replied simply, raising his wand again and giving it an experimental whirl. Voldemort immediately threw up a Shield Charm, but nothing but a stiff gust of wind struck it. But somehow, the wind caused Dumbledore's cloak to billow even more, and Voldemort was reminded strongly of old images of a wizened Merlin ages ago.

"However," Dumbledore continued, his voice ringing over the wind, "I think I enjoy something else a tad more athletic than mere sleight-of-hand? Have you ever read my Chocolate Frog card, Tom?"

What the bloody hell does that have to...

"See, if you had bothered to sample a bit of good chocolate, you might have remembered that I have a fondness for chamber music – incidentally, I am sorry to have destroyed your phonograph, I did see some classic Wagner there, which is disappointingly cliché –"

Voldemort wasted no time, and Dumbledore's voice was cut off by the roar of flames fighting against the wind, but a second later they dissipated, expertly countered – and Dumbledore's smile hadn't wavered.

"But I also have a great fondness for ten-pin bowling, and even in Italy, I managed to find a bit of time to dart away for a game or two, and..."

Voldemort's eyes widened, for now he could see the inside of Dumbledore's rippling cloak – except where was supposed to be fabric, there was empty space. Empty, black space, filled with dozens of floating orbs, clattering against each other, each with three holes burning from inside with a pale white light...

"I'd say," Dumbledore finished mildly, "I have enough for a strike or two. Or perhaps a hundred."

He pointed his wand at Voldemort, and the floating bowling balls began to fly.

The pandemonium had gotten worse in Bonaccord Hall.

Everyone, regardless of function, was on their feet screaming at an ear-splitting volume, the aisles were filling with people charging for the floor, Confederation guards were flooding into the crowd, and Tonks could already hear the tell-tale bangs of spells –

"SEIZE HER!"

Okay, time to go.

She quickly transfigured her heels into reasonable boots and she looked around wildly for a way out – but there weren't any. The path behind her was filled with people, and even as she could see the Aurors and Hit Wizards fighting from all sides to keep the bedlam from getting worse, she knew she wasn't getting out that way. And with Anti-Apparition charms and Anti-Portkey enchantments coating this hall like candy, I'm boxed in!

She looked to the chair where Cassane was supposed to be sitting – in command – and her jaw dropped. No way.

Cassane was gone.

She fought to control herself, control her form as she looked wildly around for something, anything that would help her escape, get out of here with her cover intact –

But grey-robed Confederation guards were already descending on brooms from the rafters –

Aha! "Accio broom!"

But the spell was easily deflected, and she swore as she dove away from the podium, where a torrent of Stunning Spells struck like a wave breaking on a rock –

"NO!"

Her eyes leapt to the raw scream as the burly shadow that could only be Dmitri Kemester leapt out of the crowd, his boots glowing red with a Propulsion Charm to catapult him off the steps and through the air –

To tackle a descending Confederation guard from behind, tearing the man's hands from the broom and dragging him off by brute force, following the arc of his leap as the two plummeted towards the ground –

Tonks wasted no time now. "ACCIO BROOM!"

It whistled to her hands, and she was airborne a second later, swerving out of the way of a volley of spells as she streaked towards a heap of broken tables, where Kemester was dizzily staggering up –

I can't believe I'm doing this. "Accio Kemester!"

Without warning, and barely able to keep a grip on his wand, Kemester vaulted into the air a second time, and Tonks slowed just long enough for him to drop onto the scant remaining inches of the broom –

"GO!"

She didn't need to be told twice. The double doors that had once been high above her were blown open by a single explosive curse, and then they were flying through, Tonks raising her wand to the massive glass windows that lined the hall –

There was a sound like a million exploding wind chimes, and they were through, streaking up into the chill February air and crisp sunlight, Kemester struggling to keep a grip on her as they shot into a steep climb to get as much altitude as they could –

"The boundaries, Tonks –"

But it was as if their exodus from the building had been the signal, and Tonks could only give a tight smile as the hemisphere of magic surrounding the Hall and its grounds began to crack, as if a godly hammer was tapping on an egg with a dozen nested shells of many colours, giving them just enough of a chance to flit through the hole – a hole that would be too small –

Come ON, Sirius!

Kemester roared, there was a flash of hot white light, and Tonks nearly lost her precarious grip on the overweight broom – but they were through.

They were free.

She dropped her disguise as she righted the broom, and immediately her head felt lighter without the weight of blonde curls. Short and pink, just the way I like it.

"So I guess I wasn't wrong," Kemester shouted against the cold howling wind as they soared higher, moving towards the skyscrapers of London.

"Guess you weren't," Tonks yelled, taking a firmer grip on her broom. "Disillusion us, will you?"

Kemester obliged, and Tonks gritted her teeth as she soared between the glass buildings, pointing her broom north. Need to regroup, get some focus, get some answers...

"We need to get back to the Ministry –"

"Are you nuts?" Tonks screamed, glancing back at the ugly Hit Wizard holding on behind her. "They'll try to kill us, you moron, especially considering Azkaban doesn't seem to work on you!"

"The traitor's there –"

Tonks slowed a bit, to better hear him against the wind. "You know who it is?"

"I have ideas –"

"Not enough. We need a name or something." Tonks thought about Lupin, and fervently wished that he was having a better day than she was. "Besides, my contact's closing in –"

"Not good enough, you're going to need serious firepower to take this guy down," Kemester shouted, shaking his head emphatically as they curved around one of the skyscrapers. "Maybe your little curse-breaker who got us out can help –"

"Not an option," Tonks interrupted. "He's too hard to handle." And even if I might trust you, Kemester, doesn't mean I trust you enough not to murder Sirius the second you see him. "I'll set you down and contact you later. In the meantime, you need to keep Skeeter alive – she's the only concrete evidence we have that Cuffe and Parkinson are scum that we can arrest."

She pulled the broom into a steep climb again and flew towards the roof of a tower she thought might have been called Centre Point.

A few seconds later, she slowed to a stop on the snow-covered roof.

Kemester quickly leapt off the broom and gave Tonks a firm nod. "Thanks for getting me out of there."

"And thanks for starting the pandemonium that nearly got us killed," Tonks replied, shaking her head. "And by the way, nice little wrestling move there, tackling that Confederation guard."

"Thanks –"

"Didn't stop it from being completely fucking ridiculous."

Kemester shook his head with scorn. "No respect for talent when you see it."

His wand was only inches from his outstretched fingers, blown from his hand by a casual hex and now awkwardly sticking out of the snow like a broken twig – and yet even as Blaise Zabini looked up at Antonin Dolohov's wand pointing at his face, he knew he wouldn't have a chance.

His wand might as well have been left at Hogwarts.

"You see, that," Dolohov began, his voice filled with annoyance, "was really, really stupid. I knew your mother, she really didn't raise you like that –"

"You blew my broom out of the sky," Blaise hissed, sliding back away from him and slowly beginning to pull himself into a more dignified position.

Dolohov rolled his eyes. "Speaking as a former professional Quidditch player, I was doing you a favour."

"Where's Malfoy?"

Dolohov smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know," he replied, pulling a very familiar camera with a broken strap from a pocket. "Though I suspect this is what you really want."

Blaise breathed a little easier when he saw the camera intact, but he couldn't help the sinking feeling. I'm never going to get it from this lunatic, unless...

"That camera needs to be taken to Barnabus Cuffe," he said, keeping his voice stiff and brittle as he pulled himself into a sitting position. "The Dark Lord requires –"

Dolohov sighed. "Of course he does. Tell me something, Zabini: why are you doing this?"

Blaise felt blood rush to his face. "I don't see –"

"You see, your mother had the right of it, I think," Dolohov continued thoughtfully, stroking his goatee. "She'd spend her days as a socialite husband hunting and then do this sort of business in her spare time. So what about you, then?" Dolohov leaned against the shed, keeping his wand still firmly pointed at Zabini, who was slowly getting to his feet. "Why aren't you spending your days casually fucking your way through Slytherin and Ravenclaw – 'cause frankly, speaking as someone who has spent some time in Azkaban, you want to ensure you're spending your time well before you get there."

Blaise was fully standing now, and he gave Dolohov an acrid glare which the Death Eater completely ignored.

"Come to think of it," Dolohov continued, "considering the mountain of gold your mother left you – and I've met some of her ex-husbands, it will be a mountain, considering your stepfather's likely locked out of it – you could probably spend the rest of your days living like royalty." Dolohov gave Blaise a meaningful look. "You know, wasting time, wasting money, and fucking everything that moves."

Blaise's eyes narrowed. "Well, that's tends to get boring after a while, and you don't get remembered for that kind of life. I am capable of so much more."

Dolohov sighed heavily and put a hand to his forehead. "Kid, if a certain old friend of mine wasn't one to kill me on sight, I'd introduce you to him." He met Blaise's eyes and despite his chill demeanour, Blaise could feel something in his gut shrivel back. "And then you'd understand."

He pulled back his wand and tucked the camera into his cloak with a grimace. "Get your wand."

Blaise was already moving, snatching up the wand before Dolohov finished his sentence. "The camera?"

Dolohov snorted. "Yeah, I don't think so. I'm not stupid. But apparently you are, and considering the burning that's racing down my arm, the Dark Lord has need of his Death Eaters right about now." He met Blaise's eyes again. "One last chance, Zabini."

Blaise was silent – he'd made his choice. He wasn't quite sure when he had become certain that this path was right – maybe it was before Potter had killed his mother, maybe it was when Malfoy had tasted acid at Potter's hands – but he knew he had a destiny. He knew that his life at Hogwarts was over, and there was something far bigger on the horizon.

Dolohov held the glance for a long time before shrugging with resignation. "Nobody listens to the Death Eater. Okay, fine. Welcome to the real world, Blaise Zabini." He extended a gloved hand. "Grab my arm – if you don't die in the next ten minutes, maybe you'll learn something."

There were a hundred and twenty bowling balls – and they all had a different enchantment.

Some were simple, exploding in clouds of fire or acid or bone-numbing frost when they hit his shields. Some bounced off his shields only to come whistling through the air for a second attack like a bloated Bludger. Some simply scythed through his protective charms like damp fog, and had to be incinerated with a pinpoint strike.

But Dumbledore had been more creative. One had multiplied everytime it touched a spell, forcing Voldemort to smash it apart with the remains of his stone table. One had created energy trails in its wake that remained hovering in the air even after it was destroyed, scorching away a piece of his cloak when he had brushed against it by accident. One had screamed like a dying mantichora and sprayed a trail of rainbows behind it, and everything that had approached it had

just faded away with no effect. It had nearly shredded all of Voldemort's protective enchantments before he had simply ripped a hole in space like he had with Shacklebolt and sent the damned orb twenty minutes into the past.

And one ball simply was impenetrable to anything. Every spell, every shield, every obstacle that Voldemort could conjure wouldn't stop the silvery-pink ball from smashing through it unscathed. Even a magical field designed to thicken air to a solid wall that could slow the orb couldn't stop it. Even the hole in space only held it back for twenty minutes before it ripped through the wall, showering them all in debris as it attacked again.

It was the last orb that remained, and Voldemort wiped a thin cut from his forehead as he raised his wand. If this doesn't work –

It streaked towards him. Voldemort didn't speak, only raising his wand.

The orb froze in mid-air, and the silvery-pink veneer began to crack and splinter, as if internal forces were crushing it down.

Voldemort bared his teeth. "Now."

The orb imploded in a flash of white light and smoke, and Voldemort let a hard smile reach his face.

He looked at Dumbledore, triumphant, and indeed, the old Headmaster was applauding, clear admiration on his face.

"Bravo, Tom."

"Avada Kedavra!"

Dumbledore quickly Disapparated out the way, but his smile hadn't wavered. "That was truly inspired, Tom, I honestly had not even considered that method. And such a wealth of spells you utilized – magnificent."

But then Dumbledore's smile hardened, and his eyes flashed with fury. "Such a shame, Tom, that you wasted your vast potential."

"Do not mock me, Dumbledore," Voldemort hissed. "I have defeated your arsenal, and despite the fact that you continued to attack me even as you loosed your swarm, I remain here, hardly scathed."

"And yet none of your Death Eaters have arrived," Dumbledore replied calmly. "Would you like to know why?"

Voldemort felt a twinge, for the old fool was right – where were they?

Another tremor struck the room, and Dumbledore didn't waste time. But Voldemort easily countered the spray of curses – after defeating Dumbledore's enchanted arsenal, he was duelling at his peak. Not since Dumbledore faced Grindelwald himself has there been such a duel – and I will be the one to recount it.

"You see, Tom," Dumbledore began slowly, "while I did make sure you were harried by my enchanted sporting goods, I was also making sure the battle above was going well."

Voldemort chose to respond to that comment with a flurry of hexes, but Dumbledore quickly deflected them.

"Of course, that wasn't all I was doing." Dumbledore gave a quick twirl of his wand, but no spell emerged from its tip.

Voldemort paused as a strange, chemical smell suddenly filled his nose.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled mischievously. "I was also filling this room with a Muggle compound called octane. Fawkes, if you will –"

And suddenly the phoenix soared in and landed on Dumbledore's shoulder, and Voldemort suddenly remembered a tome he had scanned cursorily decades ago regarding Muggle chemistry...

There was a flash of phoenix fire, and Voldemort instantly Disapparated, reappearing in the sky a hundred feet above the ground.

The sound of the explosion was deafening.

Voldemort quickly darted away from the fireball that blossomed beneath him, tearing through Nott Manor like superheating an overripe tomato, but as he surveyed the battlefield, he knew that the explosion was hardly the worst of his problems.

The grounds of Nott Manor had become a war zone. Voldemort's eyes widened as he saw giants – giants – roaring and stomping, their clubs sweeping through the Venomous Tentacles and Acromantula that hadn't already been cooked by the explosion. He saw his Death Eaters harried, driven back as they fought figures in silvery robes spraying spells that even he did not recognize.

Without another word, he Disapparated, reappearing on the ground and raising his wand. In the tight confines of the laboratory, he hadn't used his most devastating spells, but on the open grounds...

Voldemort raised his wand towards the line of charging giants, and his eyes flashed. So you rejected my envoys in favour of Dumbledore? I ignored this group for too long... but I can fix that.

"Arcus exitium!"

It was like a giant personification of Death's scythe had erupted from his wand. Exploding outwards with the force of an earthquake, the wave of pale white unlife hit the giants – and shredded through them. The blood flowed in torrents across the grass as the stupid behemoths groaned as one and collapsed, trying desperately to rejoin their sundered organs.

He could hear Bellatrix's mad cackle as she saw her lord. Her face was painted with blood, but Voldemort knew it wasn't her own. "Our Lord is here!" she shrieked, her eyes wild as a single slash of her wand sent silvery figures tumbling. "Drive them back, kill them all! Kill them –"

Her words were drowned out by a new sound. A sound that shook the courtyard, as the silvery figures fell back against the revitalized Death Eaters, who were fighting harder than ever.

A sound Voldemort recognized instantly. He couldn't help his eyes widening.

He didn't.

The sound – the roar – split the air again, the bestial intensity belying the fact it did not come from a human throat. And it was coming from the sky.

"You see, Tom," Dumbledore's voice split the air, and suddenly Voldemort could see the old man standing across the courtyard, next to his phoenix. He wasn't alone either – Voldemort instantly recognized the scarred angry face of Kingsley Shacklebolt sitting behind him. "Nicholas and I were always fascinated by them, and even when we found twelve uses for their blood, I always speculated we were only scratching the surface..."

It came from the sky. It was massive, probably enhanced by magic. Black scales, bronze horns, a prominent black ridge lining its back – and atop that ridge was something that seemed like a cross between a chariot and a saddle. Lashed between the massive wings, it allowed a rider to stand and brandish a weapon.

And the rider was brandishing a weapon unlike anything Voldemort had ever seen. It looked vaguely like a Muggle weapon, with a rotating barrel spewing hot light and fire, but it was massive, sized for the rider that was far bigger than any ordinary man.

A rider with a thick black beard, and a heavy brown overcoat, and a crossbow and battered pink umbrella tied to his back.

Voldemort knew that rider, and took a deep breath – the battle had just gotten very interesting.

"I'M BACK, YEH BASTARD!" Rubeus Hagrid roared, angling his massive weapon down as the Norwegian Ridgeback beneath him howled. "THIS IS NORBERTA, AND THIS IS FOR GETTING' ME EXPELLED!"

Sirius' eyes snapped to the door of the room the second he heard the knock, and his wand was up even faster.

"Who is it –"

"Let me in, Sirius!"

He flicked his wand, the lock clicked, and Tonks hurried in, kicking the door shut behind her as she tossed her broom aside and peeled her gloves off. "Any sign of –"

"I cast my spells from the office tower on the other side of Bonaccord Hall, we're good here," Sirius replied heavily, eyeing Tonks' hair with some surprise – it seemed to be cycling through a different colour every second. "What the hell happened –"

"Way too much," Tonks panted, stepping past Sirius to take a glance out the window. From the looks of things, nobody was leaving Bonaccord Hall quite yet. "Skeeter got attacked by Parkinson and Cuffe, splinched herself badly trying to flee –"

"Yeah, I saw the guards taking her out on a stretcher –"

" – Then Peeves shows up and implicates that Harry's body might have been possessed back at Hogwarts, and then Harry tries to check –"

"Wait a second, I thought Bonaccord Hall was enchanted to block spiritual attacks!" Sirius interrupted, his eyes widening. "How the hell did that damn poltergeist get –"

"I don't know what set of rules Peeves is playing with, Sirius, but it sure as hell isn't one I'm familiar with!" Tonks raked a head through her hair as she began to pace. "And then Parkinson showed up in the middle of the speech and tried to destroy our case, and then

Kemester tried to arrest Parkinson..." She took a deep breath. "Yeah."

"Where's Harry's simulacrum?" Sirius tried to keep from sounding anxious, but he could feel his heart beating faster.

"I gave it to Kemester's partner, Larshall," Tonks replied quickly. "He probably took it to St. Mungo's – I mean, did you see him leave with it?"

"There was a fair amount of Hit Wizard traffic around the boundaries," Sirius replied helplessly. "Probably searching for Cuffe and Parkinson –"

The banging on the door caught them both off-guard, but Sirius recovered first, snapping his wand at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Moony, Padfoot –"

Tonks exchanged a glance with Sirius before flicking her wand, letting Remus rush into the room. He looked exhausted, as if he had run up the five flights of stairs to the room instead of Apparating to the door.

"Wasn't sure what room you were staying at, so I had to search each floor," Remus said, holding his side. "And then I saw out the window – what the hell happened at the Inter –"

"Everything went to hell, let's go with that," Tonks interrupted. "Did you talk to Sturgis?"

Remus nodded. "Yeah." He reached into his battered coat and pulled a tiny scrap of paper from an inside pocket. "And this is what he gave me about the traitor. Wouldn't give me a name – he was still pretty spooked from being under the Imperius."

Sirius leaned over and scanned the two letters. "R.L.," he muttered aloud. "Moony, these are your initials –"

But the blood had fled from Tonks' face.

"Oh... oh fuck."

"You know –"

"Of course I know!" Tonks said furiously, slapping her hand against her forehead. "Stupid, stupid, stupid, it's the only thing that makes sense –"

"What?" Sirius asked urgently, but Tonks was already moving, her hair finally stabilized on a puke-shade of green. "Do you know –"

"Sirius, you need to get to Cassane Manor and fast," Tonks interrupted, yanking her gloves back on. "He vanished from Bonaccord when things went to hell, and right now, we need all the help we can get." She paused, and then her eyes went wide with fear. "It's coming together... oh shit, we're not going to have time! Remus, you're with me – we need to get to St. Mungo's before we lose everything –"

"Tonks, talk to us!" Sirius exclaimed, Summoning his cloak to his hands. "What do you know? What the hell is going on?"

"It's from the very beginning," Tonks muttered to herself, shaking her head. "From the very fucking beginning, why didn't I see it –"

"Tonks –"

"Sirius, the traitor's been in front of our eyes all along!" She swore again under her breath. "Ever since the beginning – since that explosion at Ollivanders that he chased us right into – fuck, probably even before that! And we didn't even suspect him, because he had just the perfect scapegoat the entire time –"

Sirius' eyes widened with sudden realization. Tonks was right – the bastard had been hiding in plain sight. "Oh. Oh shit."

He wanted to be surprised that it was raining, but somehow, in the pit of his gut, he knew he couldn't be.

The snow dissolved into slush as he locked the gate and trudged up the cobblestones to the manor, his eyes shadowed as he passed between the trees, their barren branches stretching and clawing at the path like so many wretched hands.

Brings back the memories I never cared for, he thought darkly, thinking back to the anarchy that had exploded within the conference chamber. At least Tonks and Kemester got away, and Fudge will have much to answer for before he can come looking for me... which gives me a little more time...

He wound around the last bend and saw the vine-shrouded manor – even with the chill wind, icy rain, and thick snow, the vines never seemed to lose their colour or wither away –

He paused. Something was up. The heavy wooden doors were ajar, and there was a light in one of the windows – from the looks of things, someone had lit a fire in the small fireplace in the drawing room.

His wand leapt to his hand as he hurried towards the doors, his mind racing. Had Fudge sent somebody already, or was it someone far worse?

He slipped into the darkened foyer – none of the candles of the chandelier were lit – and he silently slid the heavy door shut behind him. He padded soundlessly down the hall, towards the drawing room, raising his wand...

"Hello, Cassane."

Harry Potter's toneless voice was quiet, but somehow it sent a shiver down his spine as he stepped into the darkened drawing room. As he had expected, a tiny, sputtering fire had been lit in the grate, casting flickering light throughout the room. None of the brass instruments were floating in the air – all of them were lifeless and strewn across the table, casting weird shadows across the walls.

And Harry was sitting on the edge of the table, staring up at the massive parchment map on the wall. His eyes were shadowed, and

he looked as though he was ready to fall over from sheer exhaustion, but was somehow sitting upright. His robes were torn and filthy, stained with mud and blood.

Cassane shut the door behind him. "Harry, what are you doing here?"

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath, but continued to stare at the map. "I...I didn't know where else to go."

"You weren't at Bonaccord Hall."

Harry blinked, but didn't turn to meet his eyes. Cassane felt a sudden rush of fear in his stomach. None of this behaviour was like the Harry he knew... what had happened to him –

"Voldemort fooled us both, Nathan," Harry whispered, blinking quickly to stop the emotion. "Fooled us both... I should have seen it coming, after I saw those memories you gave me. I should have expected it. I should have known he would have sunk... would have done..."

His voice broke, and Cassane immediately moved to his side, pulling the young man close as shaking sobs broke through his veneer of composure.

"Nathan, I should have known... I should have done something... I –"

"Control," Nathan said quietly, the onslaught of memories rushing through him. He remembered saying those choked words as Lily and James had found him in the wreckage all those years ago, kneeling next to his daughter's body. He remembered Lily's green eyes, so much like her son's, filling with tears as she had held him close. And he remembered the words that she had said all those years ago, and he repeated them aloud.

"I know better than to promise things are going to be okay, but you... you need to tell me what happened. As much as it will hurt, you need to tell me everything."

The second the Norwegian Ridgeback had landed, the fight had turned into a rout.

Voldemort immediately launched a flurry of Killing Curses at the roaring dragon, but Dumbledore was even faster, ripping huge broken boulders from the foundation of Nott Manor into the air to absorb the curses. The other Death Eaters joined in the attack, but the silver-cloaked Italian mercenaries Dumbledore had hired were just as skilful, conjuring the vastly complex shields their country was well-known for.

And then Norberta breathed.

It was like a liquid inferno had erupted from the dragon's mouth. Hagrid's roar was only barely audible above the explosively concussive force of the torrent of fire. Any remaining plants in the yard were gone in an instant, and even the stones around them began to melt away.

But even through the fire, Dumbledore could see Voldemort standing tall, his wand whirling rapidly to keep a powerful shielding spell, protecting his entire force, active and stable. Once again, Dumbledore had to marvel at the man's speed and power. Oh, Tom, if we could have worked together, what wonders would we have wrought...

There was a mechanical whir, and Dumbledore glanced up, where the thick, flameproof barrel of Hagrid's weapon began to rotate, the tip glowing and sparking with raw magical energy –

Dumbledore closed his eyes and drew together his concentration as he began to chant, the wand beneath his fingers beginning to glow as a tight ball of blue-white sparks burst forth from it, like a dandelion puff blowing in the wind. It expanded, growing bigger and bigger.

Kingsley barked out an order, and the Italians immediately fell back, as Hagrid's weapon finally spoke, spraying magically-enhanced, white-hot shots of pure energy, crunching into Voldemort's shield with impressive power...

Dumbledore flicked his wand skyward, and the blue white sparks burst away, zooming like little faeries to surround the hemisphere of protection that Voldemort had created.

"Now."

Hagrid hauled on Norberta's reins, and the dragon stopped breathing as the blue-white sparks shot inward, embedding into Voldemort's shield with splintering bangs. Cracks began to spread through the shield, cracks lined with energy that Voldemort immediately began to counter –

But then Hagrid fired again, and the cracking shield exploded like a broken egg.

Norberta needed no encouragement, and Dumbledore put a hand to shield his eyes as dragonfire exploded forth again – this time washing over the Death Eaters in a hellish deluge. A lethal hellish deluge.

When the smoke cleared, there was nothing left of Nott Manor – and nothing left of its inhabitants.

Norberta shrieked with triumph, and launched herself into the air, Hagrid struggling to hold on as they soared into a victory lap. Even the Italians let out a cheer.

But Kingsley's face was grim as he glanced at Dumbledore.

"They escaped."

"There were losses, but enough of them managed to flee," Dumbledore replied grimly, as Fawkes let out a mournful trill. "His spell bought them enough time – but fortunately, the other enchantments we cast over the manor have held – including the Tracking Charms."

"So we're going to chase them?" Kingsley said, his eyes lighting up. "But what if they split up?"

Dumbledore let a tight smile creep onto his face. "That is why we must hurry, keep them harried and on their toes, unable to call for substantial reinforcements. Voldemort will soon detect the Charm placed over him and his servants, so we have little time. And I believe

we have enough here to dissuade him from dividing his forces even further."

"And if he brings in reinforcements?"

Dumbledore's smile didn't waver. "Let it not be said, Kingsley, that I would abstain from using overwhelming firepower when necessary." He cast a quick skyward glance at the dragon and Hagrid whooping with triumph. "Particularly when it is – and I daresay in this case, the word is appropriate – awesome."

"And then I came here."

He had told Cassane everything. Every moment that had passed, from the instant he had set foot in Bonaccord Hall onwards. He only made a cursory mention of the night he and Tonks had shared at Bonaccord Hall – that wasn't anyone's business – but the rest he told. Every detail he could recall, every fleeting second he could remember.

He blinked, his eyes dry. He hadn't cried either. Somehow, he had kept his composure but for the very beginning. He hadn't broken down, he hadn't lost control – he had recounted the events as if he was summarizing a Potions essay.

But why am I surprised... I didn't cry when Voldemort returned, and Cedric was killed... I told Dumbledore and Sirius everything...

Cassane's eyes had been closed in deep thought as Harry had recounted everything – the man had hardly moved since Harry had begun – but now he had opened his eyes, fixing Harry with a long, hard stare.

"Harry, I want you to listen to me," he began softly. "This was not your fault. This was Voldemort's doing, and only Voldemort's doing."

"But I –"

"NO!" Cassane roared, his voice suddenly deafening as he hammered his hand on the table. "I don't want excuses, I don't want protests, I don't want your guilt! Because at this point, none of it is

relevant. None of it is true. Half of Voldemort's tactic is to make you feel responsible for this – but you're not."

Harry took a deep breath as he tried to force back the memories of Hermione's horrified face as she had run away from him... the memories of his fist and boot slamming against her... "I can see it all, Nathan, I can't just forget –"

"When Charlie Weasley was killed," Cassane continued harshly, rising slowly to his feet, "you may have had some vestige of a reason to feel guilt – but not now. Not when that hellspawn decides to take one more step into ruining your life." His voice softened slightly for a moment. "In this case, a Pensieve is recommended."

Harry nodded numbly, already wishing that he had considered that before he had left Hogwarts.

"Whatever possession ritual Voldemort utilized," Cassane growled, Summoning a book to his hand with a brisk wave of his wand, "it likely used a link between you two – normally possession requires eye contact, but I wouldn't put it past Voldemort to try something new –"

And then Harry remembered the conversation he had had with Dumbledore, almost eight months earlier, when he had asked about the dreams. "Yeah... yeah, there's a link there – but my scar doesn't hurt anymore –"

Cassane's eyes narrowed as he scanned the book. "If there is a link... well, I'm not surprised. Voldemort's probably been utilizing magic to seal himself away from you, not even give the inkling that you should be doing the same." He looked at Harry. "And I suspect the only reason the possession worked as well as it did was because your consciousness wasn't inside your body. Incredible timing..."

"Hermione."

Cassane closed his eyes, slowly pushing the book away. "The girl... do you know where she went?"

Harry shook his head numbly. "Think she left Hogwarts – I remember seeing her leave the gates –"

"She should be found, and quickly," Cassane muttered. "I can do what I can to track her down..." He shook his head. "Do you know where her parents live?"

"Somewhere in London," Harry said quietly. "I think."

"I'll see what I can do to find her," Cassane murmured, and Harry could tell the man was thinking fast "She sent me that letter – I could probably construct a crude Tracking Charm through that."

"I want to –"

"You can't help with this, Harry," Cassane interrupted bluntly, "and neither should you. Of everything that you're feeling, she's feeling it a million times worse – and unlike you, she doesn't have options." His eyes hardened. "Or a job to do."

Harry took another deep breath, and he tried to focus. His head was throbbing with a dull ache, he hadn't slept – but somewhere in his gut, something hot was building. "Mission?"

"Focus," Cassane snapped, and before Harry could step back, the older man's hands clenched around his shoulders, and he was staring into a pair of enraged brown eyes. "At this point, you cannot stop what has already occurred, but you can destroy those involved."

And the fire in his gut surged up his spine. The dullness was gone, replaced by flaming hot clarity.

"Malfoy," Harry hissed with hatred.

"Forget Malfoy," Cassane replied, still staring into Harry's eyes. "Malfoy's the scapegoat, you know who the true criminal is. And you also know where he has fled."

"Theodore Nott," Harry spat, real anger in his voice now. "And he probably went straight to the ritual chamber – and we don't know where it is."

Cassane released Harry's shoulders and shook his head. "You're right, we don't – but you also know how to find out."

Harry blinked. Cassane was right – he did know. "You're talking about those simulamancy visions –"

"They get clearer every time, don't they?" Cassane stepped back and raised his wand, and without a word, a sheaf of papers zoomed into his hand, where he spread them across the table. "A side effect, undoubtedly, of the temporal anomaly surrounding Hogwarts. When you used simulamancy there the first time, you untapped something – and now you can use it to track Nott down."

"But we don't have a corpse –"

Cassane wordlessly pointed down at the paper. Harry bent to read, and even though he couldn't understand the thick scrawls of Arithmancy equations, he understood the paragraph Cassane had scribbled underneath – and the colour fled from his face.

"You can't be serious."

"It might be the only way, Harry." Cassane said evenly. "You now have the gold stored within the Potter Vaults, which should cover any costs. You have Tonks to perform the ritual. And with this," he finished, sliding the paper forward, "you have the necessary corrections in the ritual to make it work."

"Nathan, this is insane –"

"When you deal with this brand of magic, Harry, you're dealing with the thickness of a fine line," Cassane snapped. "The key is how much you dare to blur it."

"Tonks won't agree to this," Harry said quietly, picking up the paper and carefully folding it. "No way she'll agree – hell, I don't even think I _"

"What other option do you have?" Cassane's tone was implacable. "The longer Nott is in that chamber, the closer he comes to completing Voldemort's work – and given his sanity, I wouldn't question that it won't take long to finish things."

Harry blinked twice as he tucked the paper away. "And... and you think it'll work?"

"Even if it doesn't, do you have any other option than to try?" Cassane retorted. "This is the endgame, Harry Potter – the chips are down, the bets are made, and you have to play the hand you've been dealt. And right now, you can't walk away."

Harry took a deep breath and tried to compose himself. The plan was mad, insane, and would probably get him killed in more ways than one...

But what else can I do?

"You'll find Hermione?"

Cassane nodded as Harry picked up his cloak.

"If you see her..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"I swear to you, I will make sure she will be taken care of," Cassane promised, and for the briefest second, Harry saw a twinge of restrained grief in the old man's eyes.

"The Pensieve..." Harry began numbly, "it won't help, will it?"

Cassane shook his head.

"And you knew that."

"You can't forget destroying the ones you love," Cassane whispered, "even if it was never really you. Even if it was never your fault. Even if you did all you could." He glanced across the room at a tiny picture in the corner, with three figures in it. "Even if you destroyed yourself along the way."

Harry's hand clenched into a fist again. "I remember you telling me that I'd never understand how it felt."

Cassane nodded.

"I think now I do."

"Not quite yet," Cassane whispered. "But you will."

"What more is there to see?" Harry demanded, his voice raw. "What the fuck is left?"

Cassane blinked, and his deep brown eyes were suddenly moist. "You'll know soon enough."

Harry was gone, but Cassane had not left the room. He hadn't moved from his spot, watching the door Harry had left ajar.

"You heard it?"

"Enough of it." The voice was low, guttural – and filled with a rage unlike most had ever heard before.

A rage that was all too familiar. A rage that brought back the smells of blood-drenched leather and motor oil, of Firewhiskey and fire and pure hatred.

Cassane closed his eyes again. "The photographs... they can't reach the Daily Prophet. And you know at this point, you'll never find them."

"I know."

"And Cuffe..." Cassane's fingers traced long patterns across the table. "Well, you know."

"I know," the voice repeated. "Just like old times."

Cassane's eyebrows shot up as he turned to see Sirius Black standing in the shadows, lank black hair hanging around his face, his expression a blend of dispassionate rage and murderous grief. "You lied to me, to Harry? You remember old times?"

"Enough of them," Sirius hissed, stepping into the flickering light of the dying fire. "See, even when the group fell apart, I never really left."

"Semantics."

"And it's not hard to put things together when there's dried blood an inch thick on the rims of your tires," Sirius continued softly, stepping a little closer. "So maybe I don't remember the details, but I've got a good idea of what we did. And you know what?" He stepped close and fixed Cassane with a dead stare. "I don't regret a damn bit of it. And not even twelve years in Azkaban can take it away from me."

Cassane was silent for a long few seconds before Summoning a bottle of scotch and two glasses to his hands – the same bottle Rita Skeeter had bought him months ago.

"You must do this alone," he said coolly, uncorking the bottle and pouring a generous amount into each glass.

"Tonks and Remus are going to St. Mungo's, to deal with the Ministry traitor," Sirius replied, picking up the glass. "Don't worry – I'll do this alone."

"You found him?"

"Yeah." Sirius' laugh was bitter. "And we should have found him sooner."

They clinked glasses, and both drained their scotch in a single swig, setting down the glasses with a single, simultaneous sound.

"Good luck."

"Same to you," Sirius replied in a low voice, "but then again, I think you've had it all along."

"I need the room of Rita Skeeter –"

The Healer gave him a long-suffering look. "I already told one of your Hit Wizards that she was moved. Although at this point, I wouldn't recommend seeing her – we managed to fix the splinching without serious issue, but the treatment was exhaustive, and she remains unconscious –"

Kemester fought his urge to throttle the Healer. "Just tell me the room, please."

"Fourth floor for Spell Damage, Mider the Missing Recovery Ward," the Healer replied. "But wait, you'll need – wait!"

Kemester wasn't waiting. He hurtled down the hall towards the stairs, climbing them two at a time as he wrenched his wand free.

"God, what an ugly man –"

"- What's your hurry –"

He cut the voices off as he kicked the door at the fourth landing open, and he could see the door of the recovery ward down the hall opening, a cloaked figure slipping inside –

"STOP!" he bellowed, sprinting as fast he could, shoving a startled Healer into a wall as he seized the edge of the open door and used his momentum to pull himself inside.

The recovery ward was very small, with a trio of empty beds scattered around the shadowy room – and a figure raising his wand over the lone occupied mattress –

"Vercundus!"

Kemester's spell was high, but it clipped the traitor's shoulder, knocking him backwards, sending his curse into the ceiling. Plaster and stone immediately fell over the room in a torrent of dust, making the details of the murky room even harder to discern –

He heard a chant, and Kemerster instinctively ducked to the side. The magical blast from the traitor's wand hammered into the door, splitting it in two.

"You have nowhere to run, traitor!" Kemerster shouted, coughing against the dust. "Surrender now –"

"Expelliarmus!"

Kemerster barely got a Shield Charm up in time, and even still he could feel his grip on his wand loosen – but why had the traitor used a non-lethal spell?

And why do I know that voice...

"I repeat," he shouted, "you have nowhere to run! Surrender and I can guarantee due process of law –"

"No, you can't."

Kemerster froze. It felt as if every cell of his body had been stopped dead by shock, unable to move a muscle.

Because he knew that voice. By Merlin, he knew it. He knew the stocky cloaked figure stepping out of the shadows, pulling his hood back to reveal a heavy jaw and a snub-nose, with close-cropped hair and honest eyes...

It can't be. No, it can't be. How did I miss it... how the hell did I miss...

"I'm sorry, Dmitri."

He tried to speak, but he could only whisper the words.

"Why, Larshall?"

Author's Note: well, glad you've all enjoyed things so far - yeah, the last chapter was a blast to write, but this one is a different beast entirely. It might be the most depressing thing I've ever written, if I'm completely honest. Warning only for violence this time - as always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

-Silens

The crypt has split open. I have crossed the River Styx, and I have reached the Island. The monument stands upon the island, the wheel beneath it spinning like a clock winding down... winding down to the raven.

They will come for me, but it's too late. They will find me, but it's too late. They will fight me, but it's too late.

They may even kill me, but it's too late.

The plan's been in motion too long, every cog playing its little role, every piece clicking precisely into place. Every piece of a glorious machine, built to sunder a soul, and guarantee a life eternal.

They are the pieces the blond one and the black one never understood, the shards of the puzzle that only I was permitted to grasp. The pieces that were jagged, and tore bleeding wounds in my mind. They'll never scab over, but I will never still the rush... that feeling of exhilaration as sanity flows away...

Now I only need watch as he damns himself to find me.

Nott's eyes popped open, and he saw only darkness.

"Come find me, Potter," he rasped, his voice echoing in the chill hollowness of the chamber. "The raven's waiting."

The Healer eyed the young woman sceptically. "Are you really sure this is necessary?"

"The paperwork has all been filed," the woman replied curtly, her strong accent only colouring her impatience. "Are there complications?"

The Healer raked a hand over his balding head. "Well, no, but –"

"Then what is le problème?"

"The Healers haven't even had a chance to examine the body yet!" the Healer protested, pointing emphatically at himself. "We only just got it from the Hit Wizards –"

Her blue eyes narrowed. "Are you questioning the authority of this seal?"

The Healer gave her a pained smile. "Well, no, but... look, we have a certain degree of procedure that needs to be followed around here, and –"

"Je comprends," the woman replied with a smooth nod, "but I do have a job to do. The body, s'il vous plait."

"Fine, fine," the Healer replied tiredly, turning around to his filing cabinet, not noticing the young woman reaching into her coat. "I'm going to need your –"

"No, you won't," Fleur Delacour whispered, gently pulling the paper from the Healer's hand and angling her wand at the Healer's shocked face. "Obliviate."

His office was dark when he entered, but he was used to it, deftly lighting a few candles with a nervous wave of his wand. Immediately, his office was flooded with light, gleaming through the window behind his desk that looked out over the press floor, where thousands of papers were printed everyday. His office had been lovingly soundproofed with enchanted mahogany, so he didn't have to hear the clatter and whirl of the factory below, but he knew it was there. He was in the heart of his paper, the heart of wizarding media in England.

And while it had been a tumultuous few days, nothing could stop Barnabus Cuffe now. The previous few days, on the other hand, the affairs with Parkinson... that had been a different story.

At least now I'm in my own environment, he thought uncomfortably, settling his bulk behind the desk as he shuffled through the stack of paperwork. Nothing all that urgent, nothing that required his immediate attention...

"Just have to wait," he muttered. "Wait for that blasted boy to show up with the photographs."

He looked up from his desk and peered towards the door. "Miranda, any owls for me?"

"Just the one, Mr. Cuffe," the young blonde receptionist said with a small smile, Banishing a small white envelope onto his desk. "Just arrived ten minutes before you did."

Cuffe eyed the envelope with a growing grin as he saw the thick lettering of the address in red ink. "Close the door behind you, Miranda," he ordered, waiting until the oaken doors snapped shut before he quickly slit the envelope open, eager for the photographs to spill into his lap –

There were no photographs. Only a small slip of paper, spattered in red ink, with five ominous words scrawled across the page.

FIRE MAKES IT ALL BETTER.

Cuffe frowned as he glared at the note. "What the devil does that –"

He only barely heard the glass implode behind him before a hot whirring tire scythed into the office and crushed his skull.

He tried to Disapparate away, but Kemester was faster, the Tracking Charm whistling from the tip of his wand and clipping Larshall in the shoulder. Immediately, Kemester knew where Larshall had fled – the roof of the hospital. He's not running far... he's got a mission to finish here.

He quickly spun on his heels and after a second of discomfort, he appeared on the roof. Immediately, the frigid winds clawed at his cloak, but he didn't care – his rage was keeping him plenty warm.

He spotted Larshall instantly and threw a curse, but his partner sidestepped it, his boots skidding on the uneven stone of the roof. Between the roof and the wind, Kemester suddenly realized, a misstep could prove deadly.

"You know," Kemester began hoarsely, his voice echoing over the chill night, "I just want to know why. Was it me? Was I really that bad?"

"You were," Larshall replied quietly, "but that's not the reason." He kept his wand raised to guard himself, not making a single move to attack. Kemester shot another quick curse, but Larshall deftly parried it into the stone.

"How long?" Kemester took a careful step forward.

"The very beginning," Larshall whispered. "I'm amazed you didn't see it sooner –"

Kemester didn't wait for another word, as lightning erupted from the tip of his wand. Larshall leapt out of the line of fire with the speed of a younger man, but Kemester could see something strange in the way he moved – almost as if Larshall was listless, only going through the motions...

"You were making it easy for me, Dmitri," Larshall murmured, shaking his head as he stepped a little closer. "You told me all of your mad conspiracy theories, so I knew everything you were going to do in advance. You were so committed to your plan of bringing Potter in... I just had to watch you do it and stay in the background, and... enable Potter's destruction."

Kemester's eyes narrowed. "So you wanted him dead."

"No... no, worse. He needed to be ruined. Drove straight into the path of the Ollivanders' explosion, so he took the blame." Larshall took a shuddering breath even as Kemester fought back a hot tide of rage – he knew something had been wrong with that investigation!

"But... but he needed to be alive too. Of course, sometimes you made things difficult... like when you decided to arrest Potter on the road to Hogsmeade and beat him within an inch of his life –"

Kemester's eyes widened as he raised his wand a little higher. "So you wanted Potter alive?"

Larshall grimaced. "He... he needed to be alive, that was the plan... and you had to be kept alive too – you would have died at Hogwarts at Potter's hands if I hadn't dragged you out of there..." The stocky man suddenly twitched violently, and Kemester immediately launched another curse. This time, Larshall was barely able to deflect it.

"You got caught at Hogwarts," Kemester snarled. "That couldn't have been part of your plan!"

"But I dropped Bones' peace settlement in the Floo Network," Larshall replied, his voice barely above a whisper as he took another shaking step closer. "It could have ended the conflict months ago, taken Fudge completely out of the equation... hard to tell if I did it or whether or not it was just fate..."

For the first time that night, Kemester's rage abated. What was Larshall talking about? Was he being controlled by something, by someone? It wasn't Imperius, but was it something else –

"But I wasn't out of the game for long," Larshall whispered, "and neither were you. While you were beating the living daylights out of Snape and torturing Cuffe, I was freed... had plenty of time to fade into the background while you rifled through the old files, looking for that little scrap that I'd sent out weeks ago for a more complete restoration... it was needed to bypass the Fidelius Charm along with the house-elf, bring Black back into the picture –"

I knew it, Kemester thought furiously, I fucking knew that paper had been stolen! "So Black was involved in this mess – and you were working with him!"

Larshall laughed, but there was something weird about the laugh – it was almost as if the sound was being pulled from a different throat. It was off-key and awkward, almost as if Larshall had never laughed before.

"We... we weren't working with Black – we controlled the fool, nearly destroyed everything that Potter was seeking... but we really didn't need to, considering you were doing a fine enough job. The vaults, Dmitri... it was ingenious."

"Everything went wrong with that," Kemester whispered darkly. "Everything – including for your side! Malfoy was ruined!"

A muscle twitched in the side of Larshall's face, and he staggered slightly. Kemester fired another curse, this time shattering Larshall's Shield Charm, but Larshall somehow kept standing.

"Everything... everything went right, Dmitri – except you were poking at the holes, so I had to tell Umbridge about you... believe me, I didn't want to send you to Azkaban, but you needed to be safe –"
This time, there was nothing stopping the rage.

"You – you betrayed me to that bitch?" Kemester bellowed furiously, his wand flashing as he spat curses. "I thought it was Sanders, not you... you –"

"You had to be kept safe," Larshall replied, a helpless note entering his voice. "I would have used Imperius like Wilson and I did on Sanders and the others –"

"What?"

" – But Azkaban changed everything." A particularly harsh gust of wind caused Larshall to stumble, but this time, Kemester didn't attack. If this is truly Larshall, something's controlling him... he's saying too much, revealing everything, something's up –

"It was Malfoy who... who started it," Larshall gasped. "He triggered it, and...and when Scrimgeour said he was going to blow it up, I had to do something... and in the end, I was the one left behind. Should have died there... but his spell took over... and I lived."

A chill shot down Kemester's spine. So that's how he survived. And probably why the robes he was wearing in the hospital had long sleeves...

"And from there, I only had a few tasks left..." Larshall whispered, his voice barely audible over the wind. "Inform them when Tonks and her friend arrived, dispose of the friend's body, and silence Skeeter for good... and then..."

"I stopped you," Kemester said grimly, taking another step forward. "Reed, your arm – now."

Larshall shuddered, but without another word, he slowly peeled back his left sleeve...

To reveal a shape that was unlike anything Kemester had ever seen. It wasn't a Dark Mark, a red brand that Kemester would have recognized anywhere. No, this mark was a vivid, glowing green, and looked as if the veins in his arm had puckered to the surface and splayed a garish symbol across the skin, a symbol that looked like an eyeless face –

"In the First War, he used this," Larshall whispered in a strangled voice, "he used it to control and destroy those once their functions were completed – otherwise we can't live –"

"Reed, you need help!" Kemester screamed, his anger bleeding into panic as he rushed forward – only to hastily step back when Larshall shot a ray of hot light at him.

"It... it could jump – Dmitri, you don't know what he's created, he's going to take his tools –"

"What tools?" Kemester demanded, angling his wand at the hideous mark. "Reed, I'll blow it off, I swear to Merlin –"

"It won't –" Larshall suddenly dropped to his knees and let out an ear-splitting scream.

"REED!"

"You can't save me!" Larshall shrieked, struggling to his feet as spasms tore through his body. "I'm the sleeper, the pawn, there's another, you can't –"

"FLAMMA LACERO!"

The arc of fire sliced through the elbow of Larshall's left arm – and the limb evaporated upon contact with the flame. Larshall screamed again, this time the stump blazing like an unholy emerald ember...

"REED, NO!"

And without warning, the wind stopped. The spasms stopped. The air around them seemed to stop, and Larshall only looked at Kemester with bleeding eyes.

"You... you were the worst partner I ever had –"

Kemester choked back emotion. No –

"–And the best friend I ever knew."

"NO!"

"Goodbye, Dmitri."

And at that second, there was a spray of blood, as Larshall's eyes exploded within their sockets. Kemester lunged forward as his partner staggered back –

And over the edge.

It wasn't a long fall, but Kemester knew that Reed Larshall was dead before he hit the pavement.

He heard a chorus of screams erupt from people below, but he didn't care. He didn't even care that he was probably visible, and would be blamed – there was a numbness spreading through his gut, a horrifying feeling of pure cold.

Reed was the last.

I'm alone.

And suddenly, without warning, his mind focused on two words.

"There's... another," Kemester whispered. "Another..."

Another traitor. Another shadow. And from Larshall's dying words, not a pawn, but a key player.

"I'll avenge you, Reed," Kemester growled, pulling his hood over his head. "It's not over yet."

The colour drained from Tonks' face as she saw the body hit the pavement. The sodden crunch was audible even from her position across the street, but that wasn't what Tonks noticed.

"Well," she whispered, "guess... guess that's over. Come on, Remus."

She pulled her hood a little tighter around her face and began walking quickly, away from the scene, her mind racing as she tried to think through what she had seen. Kemester was on the roof... and Larshall's eyes were gone... that's Dark magic, Voldemort had him under something... wait a second, the simulacrum!

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

Not now, Tonks thought furiously, shaking her head and lengthening her hair enough to check the colour. I don't need this now... but how the hell are we going to –

"We have to get inside St. Mungo's," she said aloud, glancing at Remus.

"One second you're walking away, and now you're saying we have to go inside?" Lupin asked incredulously, raking a hand through his thinning hair. "The Muggles are already running over, Tonks, we need to –"

"That Hit Wizard took something Harry and I need!" Tonks whispered fiercely, pulling Lupin into a garbage-filled alleyway. "We go around –"

"No time."

Tonks' wand was in her hand, but Cassane waved it down quickly as he ducked out of the shadows. "Merlin, Cassane, what –"

"It's safe, trust me," Cassane said abruptly, glancing at Lupin. "Mr. Lupin, glad to see you're in better shape than the last time I saw you."

Lupin flushed red. "Likewise." He glanced at Tonks. "Do we have –"

"From the looks of things, I don't want to know," Tonks replied curtly. "Cassane, are you sure about this?"

"I wouldn't contact you otherwise," Cassane replied in a low voice, with a curt nod to her direction. "Did the Hit Wizards see either of you?"

"Don't think so –"

"Good, we don't want that complication," Cassane interrupted, turning back towards Lupin. "But it doesn't change the fact that things are on the move. Mr. Lupin, it would be in your best interest to come with me and provide an eyewitness account to Scrimgeour."

"And how would that help?" Lupin asked with confusion. "He'd probably blame me for not saving –"

"It lends weight to both of us," Cassane replied, turning back to Tonks. "Seeing as Scrimgeour's not exactly my biggest fan –"

"Understatement of the century," Tonks muttered.

"It would do well for us to show Scrimgeour that the traitor in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been identified and caught," Cassane finished, taking a deep breath. "Even if... even if it appears some of his treachery was forced."

"Voldemort?"

"Almost certainly," Cassane replied darkly. "I've seen it before. But you, Tonks... you need to get to Gringotts."

Tonks cocked an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, what? Why?"

"Harry will be waiting for you there," Cassane continued, glancing quickly down the alley. "He's opening up the Potter Vaults, and he needs to talk to you." He looked at Lupin. "Would you mind giving the two of us some space?"

Lupin looked worriedly at Tonks. "I – I guess."

After he was out of earshot, Cassane stepped closer.

"You've spoken to Harry?" Tonks asked anxiously. "What happened, why did he leave Bonaccord Hall –"

"I don't have time to explain it," Cassane replied grimly. "Harry will, but that's not the point. What matters is that we're out of time, and that we have a way to stop the spiritual attacks at Hogwarts, but Harry will need you for this."

Tonks understood immediately. "You're talking about simulamancy."

Cassane's eyes were hard. "You knew this was coming."

Tonks took a deep breath and put her hand to her temple, the memory of the ominous voice in her head pounding harder and harder. "I know, it's just... no, damn it, I can't –"

"There's no 'can't' anymore in this, Tonks!" Cassane snarled, stepping closer. "After what's been done, after what Harry's lost –"

He paused, and took a heavy breath, his eyes growing shadowed in the dim light of the alley. "I can't force you to do this – it must be of your own free will."

"Cassane –"

"You might want to hurry," Cassane said in a low voice, stepping around Tonks and moving towards Lupin, "because right now, it's not just Hogwarts that is running out of time."

The engine thrummed beneath him as he revved on the gas, the shocks groaning with the impact of his tires hitting the stone.

He had magically triggered the fire alarm enchantments, and the klaxon-like wail was splitting his eardrums, but he didn't care – it had done its purpose, driving the employees to run screaming from the building, leaving it deserted.

He raised his wand. The rational part of his mind had told him that it was a terrible, terrible idea, but he shoved that part of his mind back. He'd need to, if he wanted to have a chance of surviving this.

Already he imagined he felt the chill in his bones, the clamminess drawn from a Dementor swarm closing in – but he had a way to stop it. He had his wand, and he had the spell.

"Forgive me, James," Sirius whispered, "but this is for your son. ABYSSUS INCENDIA!"

His arm quaked violently as it exploded from his wand – a torrent of flame, mutating into the form of a serpentine dragon, its eyes maddened and blazing even hotter.

Sirius snapped his eyes closed and concentrated as hard as he could, forcing himself to blot out everything around him. He could control it, he had to control it before it got bigger, he had to assert his will –

And there it was. An explosion of hot pain burst against his temples, but Sirius forced it back, concentrating on the foreign thing in his mind – a seething, white-hot point of incoherent rage and flame, sending waves of raw pain surging through his head.

But Sirius knew how to control it. He took in a breath of hot air and called to mind every memory of every injustice, every moment of torture, every second that had driven him to rage and hatred.

He remembered the moment he heard James and Lily had been killed, and how he hadn't cared that Voldemort had been driven into the shadows, but only that he knew the vermin responsible for it all was not the only responsible.

He remembered screaming through the bars of his cell until he was hoarse, railing at the bitter injustice of a system, an injustice he knew deep in his gut that he was partially responsible for creating.

And he remembered watching Harry's composure crack, his godson's rage and grief and desperation finally breaking out as he had realized there was nothing – and everything – he could have done to save his old friend.

The rage was a wall against the pain, a shield curved outwards, causing the flood of agony to turn back on itself, burn white-hot upon itself, into something he could control and hold.

"Destroy it," he whispered, tasting blood in his mouth as he opened his eyes to see nothing but on a conflagration he had hoped he would never see again. "Destroy it all."

The Fiendfyre obeyed.

The bank was warmer than the frigid winds tearing through Diagon Alley, but to Tonks, it seemed far colder.

Despite the few other customers in the bank and the warm light of the crystalline chandeliers, she could see the goblins almost single-mindedly watching her. There had been little trust before when dealing with the creatures, but now that trust was long spent. Now there was just naked hostility.

And here I thought they'd cause more problems for Harry, she thought to herself, with a single curt nod to the teller, who beckoned with two long fingers for her to approach.

"Auror." The creature's voice was raspy, and utterly insubordinate. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to meet with a friend," Tonks said grimly. "He's opening a long sealed vault, and we need to talk."

"I'm going to need a name."

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

Tonks twitched against the strength of the voice, but returned the goblin's gaze with a glare. "You know exactly who it is, don't play stupid."

The goblin sniffed. "Griphook!"

She turned, and a second goblin approached, eyeing her with obvious distrust.

"This way, please," he said curtly, pointing at one of the carts.

They got in, and immediately the cart took off at a break-neck pace. Strangely, Tonks didn't really notice the howling of the air around them. Perhaps it's a new enchantment... or maybe –

"I remember meeting with Mr. Potter on the very first day he came to Gringotts," Griphook said loudly, directing the cart with decisive motions as they streaked down the tracks. "He didn't acknowledge me when he came in this time."

"He's probably got other things on his mind," Tonks replied grimly, closing her eyes against the inevitable voice, but it didn't come. I'm getting paranoid... goddamn it, this isn't like you, Tonks, pull yourself together –

The cart took a hard left turn, and Tonks grabbed a hold of the edge of the cart as they rocketed down a shaft she didn't recognize, a shaft lined with shadows, where only a few scant torches lit the darkness.

"Where are we –"

"Your Ministry commissioned these during the war," Griphook explained, his eyes narrowing with obvious disgust. "The Potters moved their money here in the height of the war to prevent any... acquisitions."

Tonks winced. Malfoy's robbery here must have really stung – Merlin only knows what the Gringotts administrators did to the goblins that were on security... on second thought, best not to think of that –

The cart screeched to a sudden halt, and Tonks was shoved painfully against the front.

"Vault S-557," Griphook said with a sniff, as Tonks stepped out the cart. "I will wait here. Potter is inside already."

But Tonks wasn't listening to the goblin. She approached the solid bronze door of the vault, a bronze that had long ago been slathered with black paint, granite and mortar. From the look of the heaps of debris strewn in front of it, the reopening had been explosive indeed.

But it was open, and Tonks couldn't help but hold her breath a little as she pried open the heavy vault door, to see the treasure she and Harry had fought so hard to attain –

The air left her lungs with quiet disappointment as she stepped inside – for there was no miraculous treasure. No jewels, no books of arcane knowledge, nothing but extremely neat stacks of Galleons.

It's the same way my paycheque comes in, she thought, stepping over a smaller stack and deeper into the vault. But then again, this was their job...

"Not much to see, is it?"

She glanced up, and there he was.

Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the thick dark circles beneath Harry's reddened eyes. It was clear he hadn't slept any more than she had – and even more clear from his posture that it was just sleep Harry wanted, but something far more quiet and empty.

"I didn't think –"

"Shh," Tonks whispered, pulling Harry into a tight embrace, her hair darkening as she held him close, a lump rising in her throat. "What – what did he –"

"He exploited us, Tonks," Harry replied, breaking the embrace as he slumped against the chill metal wall. "He found about the simulamancy – and he used this body to go into Hogwarts and..."

He shook his head violently, not meeting her eyes. "I remember absolutely everything that Voldemort did inside my body, and right now I've got the feeling that even if I wrench those memories out with a Pensieve it won't fix things... it can't fix those things –"

The lump in Tonks' throat grew even bigger. "I – I don't know what I can say, Harry –"

"You can't say anything that would change this, Tonks," Harry whispered, his voice echoing in the darkness. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate that you'd try... but it might be a while before you and I can... before we can –"

"I'll wait as long as you want," Tonks replied instantly. "Harry, I swear, I'll –"

"No, we can't wait any longer," Harry interrupted, his green eyes finally snapping to meet Tonks'. Her breath caught in her throat as she saw the grief, the horror, the guilt, the sheer rage behind them, unlike anything she had seen before. "We wait, we lose Hogwarts, and everything we've fought for becomes utterly worthless."

Tonks restrained a shiver at the sheer venom in Harry's voice – this wasn't the cold, calculating scorn she used to hear from Snape. No, this was the venom born of rage barely in check, held together with a fragment of control.

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

Shut... up... "Harry," she began carefully, stifling the voice, "we need to –"

"Voldemort thinks," Harry growled, cutting her off in mid-sentence, "that if he attacks me like this, he'll scare me away from ever using simulamancy again. He thinks – no, he knows I'm weak, and that stripping it away from me will slow us down, prevent us from ever finding Nott." He stepped closer and gripped Tonks' shoulders. "We need to prove him wrong."

Tonks closed her eyes. She had tried to tell him when they were sitting in the snow, but she hadn't been able to bring the words forward. But now...

"Harry, I don't think I can."

It wasn't the answer he was expected, and he took a step backwards, his expression mingled between shock and growing anger.

"Tonks, we need to act – we need to stop him from –"

"I tried to tell you," Tonks whispered, her breath catching in her throat, "but... look, the second simulacrum we made, something went wrong, you know that!"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "All my spells in that simulacrum become exaggerated, what's your point –"

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER. HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

And this time, despite every rational instinct in her body screaming against it, she listened.

This time, she gave in.

She felt her hair lengthen to shoulder-length, and she could see it was black as soot. She felt her face narrowing, her nose lengthening, her body shifting to just the right height. She didn't need to look in the mirror-polished walls of the vault to know her eyes had gone green.

Harry took a step back, his eyes widening. "What in the –"

"You're looking at a female version of you, Harry!" Tonks cried, her voice raw as she blinked as fast as she could. "I hear this voice roaring in my head, saying your name, and I keep unconsciously shifting towards...towards this! It keeps happening, and it's scaring the living shit out of me! The simulamancy affects me too, you know – and somehow... somehow it caused this!"

"Tonks, why didn't you tell –"

She let out a bitter, bitter laugh. "Yeah, that's just what you'd like to hear – the girl you're fucking is transforming into a twisted mirror duplicate of you and slowly losing her mind along the way! No, that totally doesn't sound like the worst sort of maudlin, self-indulgent angst and bullshit I've ever heard!" She snapped shut her eyes and concentrated as hard as she could, and in a few agonizing seconds, she had reverted to her usual form, with bright pink short hair and striking brown eyes. "Harry, it's scaring the living fuck out of me, and if we use simulamancy again... if something goes wrong again..."

Her voice trailed off as she slumped against the vault wall this time. "I don't know, Harry. I just don't fucking know."

There was a long few seconds of silence, and then Harry finally spoke up.

"Tonks, it won't be like the last time," he said quietly. "We'll be at Hogwarts, and we'll be safe. Granted, there are some changes Cassane wants to make to the ritual –"

Her eyes snapped wide-open. "What? What changes? Doesn't he fucking know what he's –"

"I trust him, Tonks," Harry snapped, "and that's saying a lot, coming from me, but we really don't have any other options now, not if we want to find Nott."

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER.

Tonks closed her eyes, fighting back the voice. "Harry... Harry, I don't know if I... fuck, Harry, I just..." She took a deep breath. "I can't fucking articulate how terrified...." She met his eyes. "I don't want to lose myself – that's how it feels, it feels like I'm losing who I am and becoming something else, something I can't control... something I don't know. No... fuck, no! I'm not going to let that happen! Not to... not to this."

Harry didn't respond for a long, long few seconds this time. He bent down, shoved a heap of gold into a small bag, and then straightened. Tonks closed her eyes, fighting to control her emotions... her fear, her anger, her –

"Tonks."

She opened her eyes to feel Harry's arms wrapping around her. Her embrace was hesitant, and she could tell Harry's was as well, but somehow she knew there was something there. Something worthwhile... something she didn't want to lose...

"Tonks, we need to do this," Harry said quietly, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I know... I know I shouldn't ask for this, but I need your help. You're the only one who can do the ritual, so we can find Nott and end this. Then afterwards, we can forget it. We can burn the goddamned books and walk away from simulamancy forever, but right now, we have to try one last time to make it work. If the theories are right and it works, I'll see the path to that secret chamber in those

visions I get, and I'll be able to get down there and make sure Nott'll never hurt anyone again – least of all us."

She could hardly speak – she knew it was what they had to do.

"You know what you're asking." Her voice was quiet, barely a murmur. "Harry, look..."

"Tonks, I love you."

Oh no.

Oh Merlin no.

He did not just say that. He did not just say that. Not that. No, not now –

"Harry –"

His grip tightened on her shoulders. "And I know you feel something for me, Tonks. I know you don't understand it – fuck, I don't understand half of this, but I need you to do this for me, for us. You're the strongest woman I know, and I know you can beat any dark, twisted magic simulamancy uses to try and screw with your head." Harry's voice was shaking. "Please. If you love me... if this thing we have together means anything... hell, if anything we've done means anything to you –"

It meant something, and they both knew it, but Tonks didn't know how to describe it or explain it. Was it love, or was it something else, something borne of bad situations, worse luck, or even something darker?

"Harry," she whispered. "Please... don't use that."

"I have no choice," he replied, and she could see him visibly trembling. "You're the one with the choice. Can you... can you do this for me?"

She looked inward, and saw something of herself teetering on a brink. She didn't know what was over that precipice, but she knew she didn't want to go over it.

But she had to make a choice. She had to say something...

And in the end, she knew it wasn't even really a choice – and that thought terrified her to the core.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'll do it."

She felt his arms tighten around her. "I'm... I'm sorry, Tonks. I'm so sorry."

"I know."

Harry stepped away from her, and their eyes met. She could see the grief and quiet desperation in his eyes, and wondered, briefly, what her eyes told him.

"Do you... do you love me?"

The precipice was yawning beneath her feet – and he was causing the ground to shake.

"I don't know," she whispered helplessly. "If I'm still sane... no, if I'm still me at the end of this, I'll... I'll let you know."

It was a house Lucius hadn't set foot inside in over two decades, not since he was a teenager, sneaking off with Bellatrix and Andromeda for a few scant hours of summer adventure. It had once been quiet and picturesque, a mystical cabin perched on the Cliffs of Dover, enchanted to extend out beyond the edge and overlook the English Channel below.

Those days were gone. Rain lashed the cabin and trickled through the split crossbeams of the ceiling. Part of the cabin had fallen away, the levitation enchantments failing over years of neglect. The entire building had lost its mystic grandeur, and now stank of sea salt and mildew.

Draco eyed the interior of the cabin with apprehension. "It's... Father, I don't understand why we're stopping here –"

"Because it is out of the way, heavily protected, and forgotten," Lucius replied briskly, raising his lit wand to survey the cabin more closely. "It's not ideal, but it is also the best place we have to plan our exodus. And considering Apparition across country boundaries is tricky on the best of days, this is a good place to utilize as a base camp. Narcissa, any stores left?"

Narcissa scowled as she peeked out of the kitchen. "Nothing that hasn't rotted past usefulness. Lucius, this kitchen is foul; I sure hope your contacts are planning on getting here soon."

"If my timing is accurate," Lucius replied curtly, glancing at his watch, "they should be here momentarily. Draco, go to the upstairs bedroom and look under the old master bed – there should be a collection of brooms, in case we need to make an emergency getaway."

He heard Draco hurrying up the stairs, and he winced as the wood creaked badly beneath each footfall as Narcissa came closer.

"We'll be all right, Narcissa."

"You trust these men?" Her voice was worried – a worry that was echoed in Lucius' gut, though he refused to acknowledge it.

"Obviously not, but they know good Malfoy gold when they see it." He gritted his teeth. "It's not ideal, but it'll work."

The doorbell rang, a clatter of old bronze bells. Lucius took a deep breath, and looked deep into his wife's eyes.

"We'll get through this, Narcissa. We're Malfoys, never forget that. We survive."

She nodded, and he walked towards the door, carefully drawing his wand –

The door evaporated into smoke, revealing a group of cloaked figures, led by a bald man with bone-white skin and red eyes, and a steadily growing cold smile that made Malfoy's blood run cold.

"Well," Lord Voldemort began softly, "isn't this interesting."

Narcissa screamed and hastily stepped back, but Lucius tried to remain undaunted as he bowed as low as he could.

"My lord," he said, as calmly as he could, "I humbly offer you my dwelling –"

The curse came out of nowhere, and suddenly Lucius was on his knees, gazing up at the Dark Lord's dispassionately disappointed expression. He could see Bellatrix skulking in the darkness as Death Eaters flooded into the building, storming into every room and soldiering up the stairs.

He saw Dolohov standing in the shadows, Draco's friend Blaise standing next to him. Blaise's expression was hard and cold, but Dolohov's was just pity, as if to tell Lucius, 'I told you so.'

And he did, Lucius thought grimly, but I had my own path to take.

He heard a scuffle and a shout on the stairs, and Lucius' heart leapt into his throat as he saw two Death Eaters dragging his son down. Draco tried to maintain a vestige of haughty control, but the second the Dark Lord's eyes landed upon him, his composure crumbled.

"I wish I could say," Voldemort whispered, "that I knew it would end this way."

Lucius' hand tightened on his wand as his mind raced. He still had his wand, he hadn't been disarmed – if he was quick enough, he could Disapparate –

"So it's a good thing that wishes can come true," Voldemort finished, his expression becoming satisfied, like a snake after consuming a particularly excellent mouse. "While I will never claim to be prescient,

I will state that it is a truly excellent event when things occur exactly as one plans."

Lucius' breath caught in his throat. How long... how long had the Dark Lord known?

"And to think, Lucius, I gave you and your son a chance," Voldemort said lightly, shaking his head with disappointment, as if Lucius was a child who had spilled his drink. "I let your son become the scapegoat and not ultimately doom himself. I gave you missions of importance, Lucius. But then... you made a mistake."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "You failed, Lucius."

Narcissa let out a strangled cry, but Lucius didn't move – he knew any hope of his survival counted on his composure in the next few seconds.

"And I, ever the merciful and patient, was willing to watch and see if you could redeem yourself," Voldemort continued, shaking his head. "But you kept failing me, Lucius, and instead of blaming yourself and striving to find my good graces, you stewed in your own waste. And don't think I didn't notice it, either." Voldemort raised a finger. "But I think, of all of your failings, the one that irked me the most was your attempt to contact Reed Larshall. You knew he was controlled, but you didn't know why or by whom, so you assumed that I was the one backing him, and thus you could use your status with me to find some measure of asylum."

Voldemort's eyes flashed. "A great risk, Lucius – but unfortunately, Mr. Larshall's allegiances were more complicated than that. It hadn't mattered much – I had cut you out of my primary information chain long beforehand, just to be safe – but your temerity, your courage was just..."

Lucius swallowed hard. "I – I apologize, my Lord –"

"Apologies are wonderful things, Lucius," Voldemort said grimly, "but they cannot erase facts. They cannot erase the fact that you failed to neutralize Harry Potter at the Zabini residence or inform me of his

attack, so I could send reinforcements or even come myself. They cannot erase the fact you bungled your attempt to steal from the goblins, and started an unnecessary conflict there that could only complicate our plans." The Dark Lord leaned close. "And they cannot erase the fact your son attempted to kill me at Hogwarts."

Draco let out a whimper as Voldemort now turned to him.

"You crossed me, Draco," Voldemort whispered, leaning close, his hand snaking out and seizing Draco's chin. "You betrayed me. The chance to completely discredit Harry Potter forever died when you stole and destroyed those photographs."

Lucius' gaze snapped to Dolohov, but the other man's expression was stony. Incredible, Lucius thought disbelievingly. Dolohov took the photographs... I wonder if they're truly destroyed –

"Now, I am a very fair man," Voldemort continued calmly, drawing his wand and lightly shoving Draco back against the stairs. "And while the treachery here has angered me, I'm willing to resolve this in a rational, sensible way. You both have your wands, and as little faith I have in both of you, I know that there is strength in the Malfoy line that I want to preserve."

Voldemort's eyes gleamed as his lipless mouth parted into a smile. "So here's what's going to happen. You two are going to face each other, father and son. The first one to kill the other will regain my trust and my confidence. If the two of you choose not to kill, or to attack me, I kill all three of you and put the Malfoy line to rest. Now, Bellatrix has informed me this is most undesirable, but I feel a certain message needs to be made extremely clear."

The Dark Lord idly glanced down at his wand. "Personally, my bet is on young Draco here – after all, he had the courage to attempt to kill me – but Lucius has surprised me in the past. Come now, get up. We – and you most of all – certainly don't have all day."

Night had finally come to Hogwarts.

"We need to get to the Hospital Wing," Harry whispered, sealing the secret passage concealed behind the one-eyed witch behind him. "Moody can wait –"

"Yeah, try telling him that," Tonks replied tersely. "But yeah, I get your point. Take the passage behind that tapestry, it's faster."

They hurriedly crossed the corridor and ducked into the passage, lighting their wands with barely a murmur.

"So you think this is going to work?" Tonks asked as they hurried up the narrow, winding stairs. "Cassane's only human – he could be wrong about this –"

"We don't have any other options right now," Harry said grimly. "If we did, we'd use them."

Tonks shook her head and gave a strange, bitter laugh.

"What?"

"It's just that a few months ago, we were balking at using simulamancy not just because it involved killing someone, but because we were skittish about doing things with corpses." She shook her head, her hair flickering between black and pink. "Now..."

"If you have another idea –"

"No, I'm not complaining," Tonks said tiredly. "I just... it's not where I wanted to be."

"That makes two of us," Harry replied. Shoving back a thick velvet tapestry, they emerged in a new corridor.

"Down the hall," Tonks muttered, keeping her wand up as they edged towards the doors of the Hospital Wing. "I'll take care of Pomfrey, you find our... our candidate for this."

"We have to be prepared for the fact that I could be out for a couple of days," Harry said, taking a deep breath as he approached the door.

"Tonks, if that happens... well, I honestly don't know what we can do, 'cause at least Nott will be moving at our speed if he's at Hogwarts –"

"I know, I know," Tonks replied quietly, angling her wand towards the door. "You get the door – go!"

Harry shoved the door open and stepped in, his eyes searching for the beds that had been curtained off. He could already feel the bile rising in his gut at what he was going to see, but he forced it back – he needed to keep a clear head and focus –

"Stupefy! Obliviate!"

The two spells streaked past him, but Harry wasn't paying attention as he pulled back the curtains of the bed at the end of the row, already dreading what was coming.

Su Li wasn't moving. She had already been sedated, from the looks of things, but all the restraints were still very much in place. She had lost weight, and Harry couldn't help but swallow back revulsion as he saw her wasted arms and thinning face.

He could hear Tonks swallow hard as she looked down at the Ravenclaw. "We... okay, we need to get her out of the restraints for this to work – Harry, grab that table and drag it over here, we need something for you to lie on to do this... diffindo, diffindo –"

Harry heard the catch in Tonks' voice. "Tonks, if you're not up to – I mean, if Cassane's notes aren't up to scratch –"

"Everything he wrote made sense," Tonks retorted hastily as she tugged Su's legs free and began fiddling with the catches on the neck restraint, but Harry could tell she wasn't comfortable. "It's just... Harry, I just don't know. This is so much worse than before, when we were just working with corpses. That magic made sense, it could be controlled, and even then we were guessing. Now..." She shook her head helplessly. "I don't know, Harry."

Harry set down the edge of the table and pointed his wand at the entrance to the Hospital Wing. "Colloportus. Look, Tonks, I know this is going to be hard, but I need you to –"

"You don't need to tell me, Harry," Tonks replied, forcing a weak smile as the neck restraint finally snapped open. "Let's just... I'll be glad when it's over. Move the table a little closer?"

Harry obliged, and she quickly slid the five simulamancy books across the table. Immediately, multi-coloured lights began to spill from between the covers, but Tonks ignored that as she began sketching a rough circle of lead around the beds.

"Diffindo," Harry murmured softly, and the final restraint around Su – the straitjacket – shredded apart. He peeled away the heavy fabric and tossed it outside the circle, now very acutely aware of Su's chest rising and falling evenly.

"You'd think she was sleeping," he muttered to himself. "Got the potions, Tonks?"

"Yeah," Tonks replied, rolling back her sleeve and wincing as she picked up a silvery knife from her bag. "Okay, deep breath – oh, fuck, that hurts –"

"Are you okay?"

"No need to be concerned, I've taken worse," Tonks said reassuringly, wincing as she guided the blood trickling down her arm into the flask with a gentle movement of her wand. "I've done this before..."

Harry pulled the filmy white fabric from the bottom of the bag and spread it over Su. He couldn't help but notice it shifting slightly with every breath the Ravenclaw girl took – and despite everything, he was still unnerved.

"Tonks, are you ready?"

She took a deep breath. "I think so. And now, the fun part." She smirked, and for a second, Harry could see the warmth return to her expression. "Time for Harry to strip."

Harry returned the smile, trying to quiet the churning in his gut even as he pulled off his shirt. "Just think," he said aloud, "when we last did this at Hogwarts, it was so awkward, I was so embarrassed –"

"You still are," Tonks noted wryly. "Just saying."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Yeah... yeah, I guess." He slid off his pants and boxers and approached the bed next to Su. He glanced back at Tonks. "You sure this isn't just some elaborate scheme for you to get in bed with me –"

His voice was cut off, because Tonks had grabbed him and pulled him into a tight embrace. He could taste her lips on his as she kissed him passionately, hungrily, desperately...

They broke the embrace, and Harry let out a nervous laugh.

"I think that'll help my concentration," he said, climbing onto the bed.

"Don't – don't mention it," Tonks replied, shivering as she stepped around the table and raised her wand. "Just come home, Harry. Make it back, and we can end this mess once and for all."

Lupin couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"It's not possible," he breathed. "He wouldn't –"

Cassane glanced at Lupin. "Lupin, think about what you're saying and about what you know about the man – you know it's possible. You know he'd do it."

"It's the reason we couldn't bring more people to deal with this," Scrimgeour growled, gesturing at the small team of Aurors gathered around Larshall's corpse. "Combining it with ongoing security at the Confederation, we're stretched to the limit." The Auror's glance snapped to Cassane. "And to think you managed to conveniently

evaporate just when your influence could have quelled the pandemonium –"

"There was nothing I could have said or done that would have solved matters at the Confederation," Cassane replied curtly, "and frankly, my talents are better served out here."

"Well, maybe then you can tell me why the hell you haven't responded to any –"

"My counsel is my own, Rufus," Cassane snapped, his eyes narrowing, "and by now, I've given you ample evidence that you can trust me. And right now, I'd rather focus on the disaster in Diagon Alley than on our own little issues. You say that Black is still on site?"

"He'd have to be if he was controlling the Fiendfyre," Lupin whispered with growing horror. He knew Sirius knew how to conjure up the hellish blaze, but he couldn't remember his friend ever using it or attempting to control it... "And he's far too good than to let himself get killed by it – sir, we need to –"

"What we need," Cassane interrupted, "is a wizard who is strong enough to contain the Fiendfyre before Diagon Alley goes up in flames. And with a man like Sirius Black behind it, you'll need someone of my calibre."

"Good, that's what I was hoping for," Scrimgeour growled. "And I want Lupin to go with you."

"What, why –"

"Because, ironically, I trust the werewolf much more than I trust you," Scrimgeour snarled. "Lupin, if I remember correctly, for a brief period you held a rank as an Auror for the Ministry?"

"Not for long," Lupin replied carefully, forcing back the painful memories, "but yes."

"Then under the eighth codicil of the Auror Code, I'm deputizing you to act on my behalf in this case," Scrimgeour ordered, his yellowish

eyes narrowing as he glanced at Cassane. "You are to aid in this operation and inform me if things go foul. Ultimately, our goals remain the same: to bring Sirius Black into custody, preferably alive."

"You aren't bringing in Dementors?" Cassane asked, raising an eyebrow.

"If they weren't helping us at Azkaban, there's no guarantee they'll help us here," Scrimgeour snapped. "Before you leave, did you happen to see where that bastard Kemester went?"

"He Disapparated –"

Scrimgeour swore. "Wonderful. One more loose cannon that we can't afford."

At first, all he could see was darkness.

The ground below him was a mottled grey and black, but it made no sound as he trudged upon it. The sky was perhaps a shade lighter, but there was no light source visible in the sky. In fact, there wasn't anything visible in the sky.

Or around him. He turned and glanced around, but there was nothing. It was as if the ground were a piece of grey-black paper pasted against a slightly brighter shade. Nothing on the ground, nothing in the sky, nothing on the horizon.

Harry exhaled and fought against the panic growing in his stomach. He took another breath and immediately coughed – the air was warm, stale and unpleasantly sticky, as if he had stepped into an abandoned rest home in the middle of a swamp.

And yet even despite the utter barrenness of the world around him, Harry knew he wasn't alone. There was something here. Something lurking beyond the horizon. Something he couldn't quite see, but knew instinctively was there.

He began to walk. Every step made no sound. The rational part of his mind told him that he was just walking towards nothing, but

something told him that he was approaching something – something he needed.

He heard a low rumble in the sky, and he glanced up to see a spark of golden lightning – but there was no thunder. Somehow, the lightning seemed familiar, but he wasn't quite sure how.

He glanced down, and immediately stumbled – because with every step, the ground has streaked away beneath his feet. It was as if every step was taking him a hundred meters. Even in the bleak, inhospitable landscape, it was unnerving.

"Got to focus," he muttered, blinking twice as he stared off into the distance – but now he could see something. It was tall – and as far away as he was, Harry guessed that it was huge – but it was something.

He took another few steps – and there it was, only ten meters away.

He didn't quite know how to describe it, but it looked like a grey stone wall, soaring high into the sky, so high that it looked like the sky and the wall were one and the same – and maybe they were, he thought uneasily – but this wall had one blemish. A single door, embedded in the wall, made of steaming black iron –

And embedded in that door was the naked torso and head of Su Li.

Whatever arms or legs she might have had were long stripped away, the shoulders and hips crudely grafted into the black iron. Her black, glossy hair hung around her pale face, hiding her dark, mirror-like eyes from anything that dared look on them. Her lips were bloodless, and as Harry stepped a little closer, he noticed that they seemed less like lips than a painter's recreation of what lips painted on a doll would look like.

A broken doll, embedded in a wall of iron.

Instinctively, Harry felt torn between the desire to run closer and help or to run away from this horrid sight, but instead he drew closer – he knew he had to get beyond the doors, he knew he had to –

Su Li looked up.

Green eyes met black eyes, and Harry felt himself recoil from her hostile stare. He wasn't welcome here – he wasn't supposed to be here.

But here he was, and he knew – somehow – that beyond that door was his answer.

"You know why I'm here," he whispered, the words echoing strangely in the air.

She didn't respond, but Harry knew that she was aware of him.

"So you know I've got to get through the door."

No response, and Harry felt frustration boil up in his gut. Why wasn't she answering?

"Will you stop me?"

But somehow, Harry already knew that she couldn't stop him. He could put his hand on that black iron handle and shove the door open. He could walk past her, and never return, and the ritual would be complete –

But there was a reason for this. There was a reason Su Li was here. There was a reason he was seeing this in his mind – or her mind, it very well could be, he wasn't sure – but what reason? Why here, and why like this?

"Is..." Harry coughed before meeting Su's eyes again. "Is this a warning?"

The painted expression curved upwards a fraction into a hint of a cruel grin, and Harry felt a brief rush of satisfaction. At least I'm figuring something out.

He stepped even closer and raised his hand. Gently, he slid aside a lock of shining black hair to look into her eyes.

"Is there any... is there any way that I can help you?"

The utter scorn and disgust in her expression told her everything he needed to answer that question.

If you had wanted to help, you wouldn't have done this. You wouldn't have come.

Harry rapped on the black iron door with his knuckles. "Don't suppose you'll tell me what's on the other side of this."

Her eyes told him all he needed to know.

He looked a little closer at the door and saw, to his surprise, that words were engraved into it, just above the handle.

Words that sent a chill down his spine.

The silent horror: most changing, least remembered.

He looked back at Su. "Are you trying to tell me something here?"

No response. In his gut, Harry knew he wasn't going to get one.

"Okay," he breathed. "Here goes nothing."

The door was unlocked. He twisted the handle and stepped outwards –

He saw it all. Laid before him like the Marauder's Map. He saw himself instinctively find the way. Every little hint, every little clue, all laid before him. It was a path, a path he could easily take –

But there were pieces missing. There was enough there to get him in, but nothing there to get him out...

He heard the whip crack as he saw the ritual room. A circular room, a single arc of white marble connecting the mechanism and pedestal in the center to the crumbling edge around it. He could see Theodore Nott's wasted face, his eager expression, his eyes burning with green and blue fire as his body warped and twisted beneath his eyes –

And then it was pain. Every nerve was on fire, every cell of his being exploding, every iota of his conscience screaming in sheer agony...

And then there was the voice. A voice that was so familiar, yet just beyond his reach. Smug, satisfied, contemplative in that of a chessmaster finally besting an old superior opponent, taking a victory that had long been held just out of reach. A voice that had finally achieved a hard-fought triumph, but did not revel – that was beneath it. No, this voice was savouring its victory, enjoying every moment, every word that slipped past.

A voice without a source. A voice without a face. And yet a voice that sent a chill down the pain-wracked synapses in his mind that could still feel fear.

"Well, this won't do... there's hardly room for three in here. I think it's time to make a little... space."

His eyes snapped open, and Tonks' breath caught in her throat as she saw Harry – not Su – sit up. There was something grim in his expression, but something strong.

"You saw it," she whispered. "But the ritual –"

"It worked," Harry said, taking a deep breath as he slid off the bed. "I can see the connection – it's good, it's there – but I'm not going to use it yet." He shook his head. "Something tells me it would be... troubling."

"But you know where it is," Tonks pursued. "You know where the tomb is?"

"Oh, he knows."

Tonks spun around, and grabbed a hold of the back of the table for support. She couldn't believe her eyes. Even Harry's eyes widened as he grabbed his pants, hastily ducking behind the curtains.

"Professor – it's not what it looks like –"

Dumbledore only gave Harry a wan, knowing smile. "Harry, I know exactly what it looks like, and as sorry as I am for what you have experienced, I cannot say that I am not proud of you." The old man blinked twice and looked Tonks, and for a second, she could see pure sadness in the man's sky-blue eyes. "And you, Miss Tonks – to you, I am truly sorry."

"Professor," Harry said breathlessly, pulling on his shirt as he stepped back out, "what are you – you're back."

"And I have been gone too long," Dumbledore said, steel in every word, his eyes blazing with righteous conviction, "but that is a tale for another day. Harry, Miss Tonks, you have fought alone for too long – will you begrudge an old man the chance to learn one of the most ancient, forgotten secrets of his school?"

"Of course not," Tonks replied steadily, a grin despite herself appearing on her face. "Not in a million years."

Author's Notes: so things are streaking towards the final conclusion. Some warnings here for disturbing imagery, but outside of that, my biggest concern is that things at the end of this chapter might not seem to make much sense. I can reassure you that there is context throughout the story for everything that happens. And I know you'll have questions - trust me when I say you'll get answers. But as always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

-Silens

The feeling of déjà vu was overwhelming.

The sky was dark and the wind was cold, but even the damp chill of the wind did nothing to block the heat from the building. Even as Lupin squinted through the acrid smoke, he felt himself already sweating. He couldn't see the tendrils of Fiendfyre just yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

It's the war all over again, Lupin thought numbly. Sirius, what have you done?

Cassane pulled back his hood and wiped some of the ashes from his brow as he surveyed the flaming building. All around them Aurors and Hit Wizards were screaming and spraying geysers of water at the building, but Lupin knew they were only doing it as a containment mechanism to prevent the fire from spreading. It would take a wizard of considerable power and skill to wrest Fiendfyre away from the caster's control, and even more power to banish it.

And Cassane's good enough to do it, Lupin thought suddenly, so what is he waiting for?

"If we want Black alive," Cassane began slowly, his voice only loud enough for Lupin to hear it above the din, "we need to get him out of there. The banishment spell will incinerate anything inside the radius of the Fiendfyre, and that will include Black."

Lupin looked at Cassane with disbelief. "So you're telling me that someone needs to go into that hellhole? It's suicide –"

"Not if you're fast, smart, and talented enough," Cassane cut him off, not returning Lupin's glance. "Unless you think you're good enough to talk Black down –"

"Wait, me?"

"– So he can banish the Fiendfyre on his own – and if he tries, he'll need to leave the building," Cassane continued, giving Lupin an irritated glare. "Either way, someone needs to go in. And right now, Black's got nowhere to run – he'll fight like a dog in a corner. At least this way he won't be harmed."

"And then what?" Lupin asked angrily. "You honestly think he'll surrender himself into Auror custody? He'll be Kissed –"

"Cassane, Lupin!" an Auror Lupin didn't recognize shouted. "We need support, now!"

Cassane ignored the Auror. He only stared at Lupin, and immediately, the werewolf understood. Of course.

"So..." he began quietly, "so what do I need to survive in there? Bubble-Head Charm, Flame-Freezing –"

"Not nearly good enough," Cassane muttered, drawing his wand and sketching a few glowing symbols in the air. "The magic Black's using to protect himself is woven into the Fiendfyre casting – as long as he maintains mental control, the fire won't hurt him. However, the Fiendfyre will superheat and blow up any Bubble-Head Charm you try to use, and Flame-Freezing only works with fires that operate at normal temperatures – if you use Flame-Freezing against Fiendfyre, you'll get frostbite bad enough to lose limbs." He muttered a few words, and the foreign symbols glowed blue-white before zooming towards Lupin. He winced for the inevitable impact, but the symbols didn't touch him, only began to orbit around his head like a constellation.

"What the..."

"Highly delicate magic Dumbledore worked on when he fought Grindelwald," Cassane replied briskly. "It's timed, it won't hold for long, but it will block against smoke inhalation and the extreme heat. The actual flames –"

There was a crack of splintering masonry, and the squeal of overheated metal, and Lupin winced as he heard the thunderous crash.

Cassane nodded curtly. "And that, obviously... well, it won't block that. It's still dangerous, but I reckon Black will be on the press floor. The spells fade in ten minutes – you've got that much time to get Black out of there. If you're not out by then..."

Lupin nodded. "I got it." He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes again as he prepared to run. "Here goes nothing."

"If anything, it makes way too much sense."

They were walking quickly down the darkened hallways. He could hear Dumbledore's robes rustling as they headed down the stairs towards the dungeons, the only other sound besides the crackling of the torches and his voice.

"An interesting statement, Harry," Dumbledore remarked, his wand suddenly lighting without a thought. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"There were other secrets of Hogwarts that Tom Riddle – Tonks, that was Voldemort's old name – found when he was at Hogwarts," Harry began, drawing his own wand as they entered the dark, dank hall, where which most of the corridors in the dungeons sprung. "He found the Chamber of Secrets in his sixth year, in 1942, and he used it to attack Muggleborns, but after Moaning Myrtle was killed, he laid low. He knew that you, Professor, were keeping an eye on him."

"Clearly not closely enough," Dumbledore said grimly.

"Professor, you can't blame yourself, you were in the middle of a war with Grindelwald, in 1943," Tonks replied, shaking her head. "You couldn't be everywhere at once. Go on, Harry."

"So my guess is that during his seventh year, Riddle decided to go even deeper into Hogwarts," Harry said, turning down a corridor that went past Snape's old classroom. "He would have had a natural curiosity for the old pureblood families, and I can bet anything that he might have heard old stories about Phineas Black from either Sirius' father or uncle."

Tonks winced. "So that insane nutcase, that monster Cygnus Black, the one that was possessing Sirius when he attacked us and destroyed the Shrieking Shack – he might have set Voldemort off on this hunt?"

"Seems likely to me," Harry admitted. "This is just my guesses, but it makes sense. So let's say that Voldemort connects the dots like we did and begins looking for Phineas Black's tomb – the tomb the Headmaster built, but was never laid to rest in. A tomb that wasn't meant to be built inside Hogwarts, and cracked the surface of the protections the Founders placed over this spirit chamber."

"Plausible enough," Dumbledore said calmly, as they passed Snape's classroom and continued towards the storage rooms. "And we're heading for that place right now?"

"Yes," Harry breathed as they rounded the corner to reveal a long row of closed doors – Snape's storage cupboards. "But here's the thing – Riddle was in his seventh year at Hogwarts, and as smart and talented and powerful as he was, I sincerely doubt he had the magic to get into the spirit chamber." Harry grimaced. "But I bet he took down everything he could about the entrance or any protections to get there, and I bet he spent some of his time abroad finding the magic he'd need to break inside."

"And skipping forward to September, he teaches Theodore Nott everything he needs to know to get inside," Tonks finished, as they strode past door after door. "And he relies on Nott being smart enough to figure out the magic and break the... seals? Is that what's keeping the dangerous ghosts back, Harry?"

"I honestly have no idea," Harry admitted. "I only get glimpses of the mechanism that the Founders built in that chamber – honestly, it doesn't quite make much sense, it looks way ahead of its time – so I'm not entirely sure how to stop things, but I do know that Voldemort will have built in some sort of failsafe to prevent Hogwarts from being destroyed."

"That... doesn't sound like Voldemort," Tonks said sceptically.

"On the contrary, Miss Tonks," Dumbledore corrected. "In fact, Harry's logic makes a great deal of sense – I can easily guess Voldemort wanted Hogwarts intact and stable once the spiritual attacks had finished."

"Excepted he miscalculated," Harry murmured. "He didn't know what Tonks and I were doing."

Tonks let a tight smile slide onto her face as she drew her wand and lit the tip. "You're talking about simulamancy."

"It caused the conjunction," Dumbledore said grimly, "of that I am quite certain. The interfering magic caused the protections around Hogwarts and its grounds to mutate, thus producing the time distortion surrounding the school. And if the patterns that Alastor described to me are accurate –"

"Wait, you spoke with Moody?" Tonks interrupted, her eyes widening and her hair going bleach-blonde. "Where, when?"

"Right before I went to the Hospital Wing to see you two," Dumbledore replied, giving Tonks a small smile. "I needed to make sure I was on the same page as the two of you, and to retrieve these." He reached into his pocket, and Harry couldn't help but make a noise of surprise as Dumbledore pulled the Ectoplasmic Harpoon and Projector from his pocket and handed them gently to Tonks. "I figured, given we may encounter malevolent spirits, that they could come in handy. But back to our discussion, the conjunction also gave Voldemort's agents a certain degree of flexibility. Normally magic such as this requires a highly controlled pattern to be effective. Here –"

"He could go through the houses out of order," Harry finished, his grip tightening on his wand as they turned down another corridor, this one even darker and dirtier than the last. "But I could only imagine how unstable that's made the magic, or what it's done to Nott's sanity. But what we do know is this: if we go through the list of possessions on our pattern, with Luna being possessed by both a Slytherin and Ravenclaw ghost, Ernie being possessed by two different Hufflepuff ghosts, and... when Voldemort possessed me as the second Gryffindor possession, it means that Nott only has two possible possession options left: a Slytherin and the last Ravenclaw."

"Which symbolizes death, and with the time distortion, is likely a spirit that not even Theodore Nott will dare release," Dumbledore said quietly, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Such a release has the very real capacity to slow time to the point where Hogwarts is either lost forever, or instantly destroyed. Both plans would not please Voldemort –"

"Professor, with respect, at least from what I... remember from when I was possessed, Nott's insane." Harry took a deep breath as he slowed his walk, coming up on a blank strip of wall next to a barred door. "If he's even aware of Voldemort's orders, he might disregard them anyway."

"This was the room where we kept the two Hit Wizards, Larshall and Sanders," Dumbledore said sharply, pointing at the barred door. "That explains how they were freed so easily, if we're close to the entrance of the tomb."

"We are," Harry muttered, crouching low and examining the ground. He wasn't surprised to see much of the thick dust and grime on the floor was scuffed and disturbed – someone had run through the area recently. "Professor, I think we're close – do you have any spells or magic that could detect secret doors?"

Dumbledore frowned. He raised his wand and murmured a few words Harry couldn't catch. Immediately, four red sparks popped out of the Headmaster's wand, and immediately began to skim across the walls,

ceiling, and floor. Without warning, the spark that was sliding along the left wall let out a loud ping and flickered brightly.

They hurried to the spot as the sparks faded, and Harry scanned the blank stone wall.

"You think the door is here?"

"Oh, most certainly," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully, "but the question is how to gain entrance. Such an entrance would have been crafted by Phineas Black, so one must wonder what enchantments he would have used –"

"EXPULSO!"

Harry flung a hand over his eyes and stumbled backwards as shards of stone peppered his robes. He wiped his eyes hastily to see Tonks smirking as she blew across the top of her wand.

Dumbledore gave a small cough, but Harry noticed a small smile on the old man's face. "Well, there's that method too."

Harry crouched and pushed himself through the narrow hole Tonks had blasted in the rock, lighting his wand as he stepped into the tomb, a half-remembered image coming to his mind.

"This is it," he said, as Dumbledore nimbly stepped through the hole.

Despite the broken stone filling the room, it was every bit as ostentatious and overwrought as Harry had expected. White marble gleamed from the light of his wand, intricately carved with writhing snakes, entwined around the Black family crest. Harry could spot traces of dusty silver ornamenting the walls, and as Harry glanced back at Tonks climbing through the hole, he noticed a rather striking fresco of what looked like Hogwarts covering the wall.

"A tomb fit for the most kingly of Headmasters," Dumbledore said, his expression hardening as his wand brightened. His bright blue eyes immediately fixed on the ornate sarcophagus, set in a depression

against the far wall. "And I suspect our culprits entered the depths through that."

Tonks aimed her wand at the sarcophagus, but Dumbledore raised a hand, gesturing for her to wait.

"Do you think it's trapped?"

"Almost certainly, Miss Tonks," Dumbledore replied grimly, gesturing at the ceiling. Harry looked up and immediately took a step back as he saw the jagged-looking silver runes lining the arched ceiling. "Likely a trap or barrier in some form to prevent all but Slytherins from approaching, a trap that Voldemort would not have bothered to remove." He glanced at Harry, who was eyeing the sarcophagus cautiously. "Harry, why don't you go and take a look?"

"But you just said –"

"Ah, but I suspect you might just display enough Slytherin tendencies to get through," Dumbledore replied, stroking his beard. "Don't worry, I'll Summon you away if there is any danger."

Harry gritted his teeth, but he stepped forward, crossing the line of runes, bracing himself for the worst –

Nothing happened.

Dumbledore's eyes brightened. "Ah, good. Now, Harry, if you would examine the sarcophagus?"

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry muttered, stepping into the depression and gesturing at the heavy sarcophagus lid. The marble slab immediately lifted free, and Harry carefully set it down adjacent to the coffin with a heavy thud.

"It looks like..." he began peering into the blackness of the sarcophagus.

"Yes?"

"I think this is our entry, Professor," Harry said quietly, gazing into the shaft hidden inside the sarcophagus. The light from his wand only lit a few meters down the shaft – it looked as deep as the shaft down to the Chamber of Secrets. "Professor, do you have Fawkes?"

"I'm fairly certain Fawkes will not be able to pass through the trap, Harry," Dumbledore replied with a frown. "Is it deep?"

"Yeah," Harry said, peering into the darkness. "Which raises the question how Nott got down there without hurting himself – or why the builders of this place didn't notice the shaft –"

There was a sudden sizzle, and Harry spun to see a white scrawl of energy erupting from the tip of Dumbledore's wand. The line of energy lazily contorted, slicing across the runes on the ceiling, each dying with a sudden pop and a burst of foul-smelling smoke.

"I am sorry, Harry," Dumbledore apologized, as the last of the runes popped away and he stepped closer. "Just a moment ago, the formula of the runes became apparent to me, including how one might disable them." He glanced down the shaft. "Hmm... we might need Fawkes here – this shaft does not appear nearly as slick or safe as that of the pipe for the Chamber of Secrets."

But Tonks frowned even harder as she stepped closer, her hair going long, straight, and a swampy green. "Well, I'm not the expert here, but it might not be a good idea to bring Fawkes in here, Professor. If there's magic down there that works on patterns of life and death, wouldn't a phoenix mess with that pattern?"

Dumbledore paused. "An interesting hypothesis, Miss Tonks – and also one we cannot afford to take lightly, as I suspect we will soon be dealing with magic far beyond all of our ken, arcane secrets from the Founders of this very school."

Harry took a deep breath as he looked back at the hole. "So, who first?"

He wished his thoughts were less clear. He wished that he could blink with confusion and shake his head with disbelief. He wished that he didn't understand – no, that he was incapable of understanding.

But he wasn't. Everything was as clear as glass, as the crystal that he once had stored in the mahogany cabinets of his manor.

Before everything had gone to pieces. Before he had to stand in a ruined building and face his son.

Putting as much weight as he dared on his cane, he got to his feet, his wand sliding to his fingers. Despite the shallowness of his breaths, his fingers were dry, not slick with nervous sweat. If anything, he was calm, composted. Like a Malfoy should be.

The Dark Lord did not say a word – the red-eyed gaze alternated between him and his son. Nothing more needed to be said – it was a very clear ultimatum.

He could see the cracks in his son's scarred visage – the uncertainty, the fear, the outright terror – and for a second, he wondered why he didn't feel those emotions. By all reckoning, he suspected he should feel despair or fear or rage – but he didn't.

"Lucius..."

He could hear his wife's plea, and despite himself, he glanced at her. All of the emotions that he didn't have were plain on her face, and for a second, he wanted to break out of the slowly-forming circle and hold her in his arms –

"Make a decision, Lucius." Bellatrix spat every word from her mouth like venom. "The Dark Lord may have bought us some time here – on my advisement, of course – but the half-giant oaf and his lizard are on their way." Her eyes blazed with hateful fury. "And I'd prefer that my sister does not come to harm."

"I understand." In his mind, he was astounded how calm, how controlled he sounded, and despite himself, a tiny grin slid onto his pallid lips. "Fortunately for us, I have another option."

And he did. It was a desperate ploy, an ace in the hole, but it could work. He would take the easy way out – the Malfoy way out – and save his son the torment of killing his father.

His hand snaked inside his robes, to an innermost pocket where he kept a tiny vial he had received over fourteen years ago, a vial filled with a clear liquid, a vial no Auror would understand why he, of all people, kept on his person.

He flicked the tiny cork cap free with his thumb as he brought it to his lips. He watched Bellatrix's mouth open in a shriek, the Dark Lord's eyes narrowing sharply, but they could do nothing to stop it, the fluid was already trickling down his throat, and soon he would feel the pounding in his chest and it would end...

There was no pounding.

He froze. Something was wrong. He stared at the vial with horror and panic even as a faint feeling of numb fog filled his mind – it wasn't possible, he had seen the damned bat test it before he gave it to him –

The vial slipped from his numb fingers, but did not crash to the floor.

It flew to the white fingers of the Dark Lord.

"Oh," the Dark Lord whispered, his red eyes gleaming with sudden recognition, "oh this is very interesting... Severus, you brilliant, devious man..."

The Dark Lord looked up at Lucius, and his lipless mouth twisted. "So you sought a relief through Liar's Heartstone, which would bring your death if the Veritaserum slid down your throat... ingenious, Lucius, truly ingenious, and such a heartwarming display of affection for your son..."

The mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "Shame that it appears, at least initially, that Liar's Heartstone is fake."

There were gasps from the Death Eaters, even as Voldemort continued to admire the tiny bottle.

"A brilliant con," the Dark Lord murmured. "Earns the man his Potions Mastery, and gives his friends a way to avoid the dull tang of Veritaserum – and best of all, the Ministry dares not test his invention, for such deaths would appear as 'interrogation casualties'. So they rely on the word of a man vouched for by Dumbledore himself, for even in the years of Crouch, they would not dare cross Albus Dumbledore."

The Dark Lord's eyes lit up. "And that means, Lucius, that even if you summon the will to kill your son, you have no desire left to live – and while I do appreciate those with nothing to live for, they have a bad habit of seeking the cold, dark, embrace of death instead of seeking something more constructive." The Dark Lord glanced meaningfully at Dolohov, whose eyes were stony.

"My Lord, we must consider the time," Dolohov said curtly. "Given the rough distance between Nott's manor and this wreck, I suspect Hagrid and his dragon will be arriving shortly."

"Agreed," the Dark Lord replied briskly, "so let us wrap things up? Lucius, you clearly have no intention of killing your son, and to judge by the petrified look on his face, he cannot kill you. So here is what will happen: I will be a merciful Lord, and extend mercy to your wife." He nodded to Bellatrix. "After all, I keep the interests of my closest friends in mind."

He could hardly believe his ears – Narcissa would be safe, she would have sanctuary –

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed. "However, your son needs to learn a few very important lessons, and I think it's appropriate that you watch. Fenrir, if you will."

He didn't even see the werewolf leap from the shadows, but he heard his son scream as the werewolf pounced onto Draco, his razor-edged nails slashing, his gleaming teeth biting. He heard Narcissa scream, but Bellatrix's grip on her sister's arm was iron.

"It's not the full moon," the Dark Lord said conversationally, ignoring the strangled yells and blood splattering across the broken floorboards, "but rest assured, once Fenrir is finished breaking Draco, Bellatrix will take great care in putting him back together."

He couldn't say anything. He knew the blood was gone from his face as he watched the werewolf tearing into his son with savage intensity, the screams only split by the sounds of snapping bones and tearing flesh.

"And I?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

The Dark Lord had no expression. "In recognition for your years of service, Lucius: I will be merciful this one time. I grant you a clean death."

He wished he could be standing on the marble floor of his manor, a place worthy of his final stand.

He wished he could hold his son and tell him that somehow, the Malfoy name would stand tall, that they would somehow persevere and seize the greatness they had once craved.

He met Narcissa's beautiful eyes and he wished he could hold his wife as well and tell them that he loved them, that he would always be there for them, and that whatever he was called to do, he would always come home.

"Avada Kedavra."

There was a flash of green, and his wishes died unspoken.

Despite the light of their wands, the darkness didn't fade away.

It was almost like a living thing, clawing and scratching back every fragment of light, as if the very presence of light in the chamber was somehow an affront to the darkness.

Dumbledore lowered his wand very slowly, the soles of his boots still glowing from the spells cast so that they could land safely. The white light from his wand only highlighted the lines on his face and the blazing energy in his eyes.

"Harry, do you see anything?"

Harry raised his wand a little higher as he tried to peer through the blackness. The ground beneath him was unhewn stone, rough enough to nearly twist his ankles upon landing, but he had the strangest feeling that the jagged roughness of the rocks was not only intentional, but sculpted, as if some ancient intellect had shaped the ground to look like it.

He tried to peer through the darkness – he couldn't tell how big the room was, it was too dark. "Professor, I don't see anything. Don't you have any better spells?"

Dumbledore frowned for a few seconds, and then with a quick murmur, raised his wand high. The spark of light that leapt from the tip of the wand soared upwards, pushing back the darkness over the jagged ceiling, but barely illuminating the cavern.

Tonks whistled softly. "Shit..."

The cavern seemed to be too big to fit beneath Hogwarts, with soaring, cathedral-like walls and vaulted ceilings. Along the edges of the cavern, stalagmites erupted forth and extended like talons, but the path was surprisingly smooth, and Harry could only wonder if the Founders had never intended the place to be found, why the path seemed so smooth...

He squinted as he peered further – in the distance, it looked as if there was a fissure in the rock wall, and if he looked hard enough, he thought he could see a flicker of greyish light –

"Professor –"

"I see it, Harry," Dumbledore said softly, stepping closer. "The flicker of light looks like flames –"

"But fire isn't grey," Tonks muttered, stepping next to Harry and taking a hold of his hand – but even despite the comforting warmth of her palm, he couldn't help but feel a damp, clammy chill race down his spine. "Professor, are you –"

"This is magic of a different time, Miss Tonks," Dumbledore replied, adjusting his spectacles as he lowered his wand. "Magic of a bygone era, where wonders were wrought with incantations and rituals of power that even I cannot fathom. Magic that may not be as sophisticated as that which we use today, but made up for sophistication with raw, unrestrained power, and a desire to plumb the very boundaries of life and death. Magic that would be deemed Dark or restricted to the Department of Mysteries because it deals with death and what might come after, a mystery where very few of us have dared explore." Dumbledore's expression hardened. "It is not hard to understand what drew Tom Riddle to this place."

The path was uneven, but passable, and Harry felt his gaze being drawn to the sheer walls of rock rising closer and closer around them, as if it was sculpted by an unseen hand – and the more Harry stared at the stone, the more he felt it. Something was wrong about this cavern – something out of sync with the natural world, with –

"This is a hall magic formed," Dumbledore said in a low voice, answering Harry's question as they trudged closer to the greyish flicker. "Not formed by any natural process, or by any witch or wizard alive today."

"Then what could –"

Tonks' voice stopped in mid-sentence as she glanced closer at the stone wall surrounding the high-ceilinged narrow corridor they had walked into – for on every inch of the wall there were words, repeating over and over.

...even armour of finest platinum has a crack / on the walls of pain
the spirits wrack / to find the truth the makers lack / our place in hell is
missing...

Harry slowly ran his finger over the rough words carved in the wall.
"I... Professor, do you –"

But Dumbledore did not respond, only pointed upwards, at the path ahead.

And there he was, his smile smug, insufferable, and unfailingly twisted, his beady eyes alight with merriment and horrible curiosity...

"Peeves," Tonks growled.

The poltergeist didn't respond to Tonks' word – he only kept smiling that toothy smile, not moving from his spot high above the path, his eyes knowing and mocking –

"Enough of this charade."

Harry tore his eyes away from Peeves to Dumbledore, and he found himself involuntarily stepping back away from his Headmaster. He had never seen anger like he did on Dumbledore's face, anger that had gone beyond simple contempt or hatred – no, this was even beyond righteous rage, but the raw fury of a powerful man driven to the limits of patience and the end of control.

"I have no more patience for games, Peeves," Dumbledore said in a low, terrifying voice, tightly controlled but threatening all the same, his eyes blazing with raw fury. Harry's grip on Tonks' hand involuntarily tightened. "We have had enough. Whatever horrific crimes lie at the center of your origin that drive you to behave like in such a villainous manner are no longer of consequence – leave."

Peeves blinked, and for a second, Harry thought the threat had been enough – but the poltergeist did not leave its spot.

Instead it raised an arm, and pointed into towards the grey flicker.

"I..." Harry coughed as he tried to summon up his voice. "I don't think he's going to stop us, Professor. He never did before."

"He is the one piece of this puzzle that continues to elude us all," Dumbledore said, his voice low and harsh enough to vibrate even the stone around them. "The one piece that doesn't match up with the rest of the story, the one element that remains elusive –"

"Well, if he's not stopping us, he's kind of irrelevant right now," Tonks said nervously, her hair going dark as she glanced up at the poltergeist above him. "We need to find Nott, and I get the strange feeling we're close."

Harry took a deep breath. "The corridor doesn't look much longer. Professor, any spells you know that might help?"

Dumbledore paused, and then turned to face Harry and Tonks.

"Declino phasmatis."

Immediately, Harry felt a frigid feeling spread through him, as if every inch of his body had been soaked in icy, turgid water.

"I apologize for this discomfort," Dumbledore said sombrely, "but it should keep you protected from offensive spiritual attacks. It will not block possession – there is not concrete form of magic that can effectively stand against that – but it will prevent magical attacks from harming your soul if cast by ghosts or poltergeists."

"You think that's likely?"

"Miss Tonks, I suspect that is the only attack that we will face," Dumbledore replied grimly. "The more I stand here, the more I suspect it – we are no longer in the world we know. The reality we see here is twisted, only tenuously tied to what we recognize as normal. When the Founders chose to seal away the souls that could harm Hogwarts, they did it in a way that was both ingenious and exceedingly dangerous – a reality out of time with our own."

The Headmaster bent, and picked up a loose stone.

"What do you want to do with that?"

Dumbledore did not respond to Harry's question. He let go of the stone.

And it did not fall.

"Out of time," he said. "A kink in the very fabric of reality we know – a magic far beyond what I ever dared to dream." Dumbledore's eyes narrowed dangerously. "However, if I am to believe my own eyes, Voldemort somehow managed to parse the magic of this place, to perceive and understand the complex and twisted relations between time and space and death itself – even to the point where he could create magic simple enough to be used by anyone to send articles into the past or future, albeit with a limited scope." The Headmaster shook his head. "Oh, Tom, what have you done..."

"The question is not what he did, Professor."

All of their wands snapped up towards Peeves, but the poltergeist seemed completely unconcerned – or unaware entirely – that he was being threatened.

"See, he only tapped the surface," Peeves hissed, not moving from his spot. "Voldemort skimmed the water of the river, but he didn't plumb the depths – well, at least not initially. But then again, you already know when he did go swimming, don't you, Professor?"

"We don't have time for your riddles, Peeves," Dumbledore said harshly, completely ignoring Harry and Tonks' confused glances at the Headmaster. "If you know something, or if you plan to stop us –"

The Headmaster's words were interrupted with laughter – shrill, uneven, unnatural laughter.

"Oh – oh, Professor, you all can pass," Peeves cackled, still not moving from his spot. "I'm not going to stop you – after all, the game's still not over, and I'd love to see you bring things back into place, but there's nothing here I want. I'm just here because I figured you all want to see that familiar face – you know, that grin that reassures you that you're on the right path." Peeves' smile deepened, and not for the first time, Harry saw something malevolent in the poltergeist's

eyes. "After all, I've read my parts of my script, I know when I come in."

And without another word, the poltergeist vanished. It was as if Harry had blinked and he was gone – nothing indicated Peeves had ever been there, or was even anything but a figment of their imaginations...

"We're getting spooked," Tonks said, taking a deep breath, her hair going blood-red. "We need to keep going – look, the light's not that far ahead."

They continued down the path, and...

"Professor, have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"I wish I could tell you that I have." Dumbledore's voice seemed to catch for a moment. "But on the other hand...even seeing it now, I would never have wanted to."

Even with the protective charms, the heat was worse than anything Lupin could have imagined.

His head pounded as he staggered across the main floor of the building, where the enchanted presses had once pounded out the Daily Prophet. The presses were gone now, leaving nothing behind but scorched stone and twisted scraps of metal, but Lupin thought he could still smell the chemical odour of oil and ink.

The Fiendfyre surged and coiled around the cavernous, hellish hall, but there was little left to burn in the epicenter of the spell, and few of the beastly apparitions that composed the flames were visible. But Lupin could still feel the hot pangs of the magic fire, barely contained by the protective magic. It was as if on every inch of his skin he could feel the blistering heat of being only an inch from a burning oven, even with the enchantments.

It's as if I'm being cooked alive, Lupin thought numbly. Well, at least until the enchantments run out – then I'll be burned to cinders... come on, Sirius, where the hell are you –

The spell came out of nowhere. Lupin ducked instinctively, his eyes tracing the line of attack –

"Sirius!"

He gagged on the hot smoke, but he saw Sirius' eyes widen with recognition. He seemed completely untouched by the flames and smoke, standing inside a magical cylinder (which seemed more defined by the absence of the inferno) which Lupin guessed was a rough protection that the Fiendfyre spell allowed.

"Get over here!" he heard Sirius shout, waving wildly for his friend to get inside the enchanted circle, his long-fireproofed Triumph motorbike growling next to him.

He took as deep of a breath as he dared and staggered through the flames, clawing his way to his closest friend, nearly stumbling over a hunk of blackened, withering metal –

The bracing chill of the night air nearly sent him tumbling backwards. It was as if he had stepped out into a chill, frozen meadow, with not a hint of smoke or ash to taint it. He glanced upwards to only see open sky through a shredded hole in the roof, and while the night was streaked with dark clouds, he thought he could see a glimpse of the moon...

"I can't believe it," Sirius whispered, pulling Lupin to his feet and into a tight embrace. "Merlin damn it all, you came through that hell... how did you –"

"Cassane," Lupin gasped, wiping soot from his eyes as he struggled to get his bearings. "He... you talked to him before doing this? He knew?"

"Enough of it."

There was something in Sirius' voice that Lupin hadn't heard in a long time. Not since the war. It wasn't rage – no, he had heard that in the

Shrieking Shack two years ago. No, this was something deeper, rawer, anger tinged with grief and something else...

"Sirius, they know you're in –"

"Yeah, I know."

"They've dropped Anti-Apparition jinxes all over the block," Lupin said, his voice quickening as he glanced at the hell seething behind him. "You're not going to be able to Apparate out of here, and odds are, with you controlling the Fiendfyre, you won't be able to create any Portkeys at the same time."

Sirius didn't answer that comment, only looking out at the fire.

"You want to know why I did this?"

Lupin nodded. He knew he should be shouting something, demanding an explanation why the hell Sirius would have dared try something this insane, but that tone in Sirius' voice said more than words.

"Do you want to know what Voldemort did to Harry?"

A new chill rushed down Lupin's spine that had nothing to do with the night air. "What? Did Voldemort... how –"

"I can't explain all the details," Sirius interrupted, a real edge in his voice this time, "but I don't need to, and I don't want to. I listened to my godson break down, say how he lost something that he'll never be able to get back, something that Voldemort never tried to take from any of us. Hell, I didn't even think Voldemort was capable of it..." He looked away, staring into the Fiendfyre. "There are lines, Remus, and then there are lines. Voldemort crossed one of the latter ones."

Lupin couldn't respond. He didn't know what to say – what had Voldemort done?

"And you know what the worst thing was?" Sirius continued hoarsely, turning back to Lupin. "Even despite every instinct in my gut that was

screaming for me to run out and do something, to hold my godson in my arms and tell him it would all be okay, I knew somehow that it wouldn't be enough. No, that's not it – no, it's more like I couldn't just say 'it's all going to be okay', because that would be a lie." Sirius' face contorted in a snarl. "It's not just going to be 'okay'. Sometimes, everything goes to hell, and there's not a damn bit of respite you can give that doesn't involve the good intentions that pave the road there.

"So I stayed back in the shadows, knowing that I had to make sure the rest of the world didn't find out about what Voldemort did." Sirius' voice was suddenly guttural, almost savage. "I knew that somehow, I was going to be the one to make sure the truth never saw the light of day – and if that meant consigning this shithole and Cuffe to the hell they belong in, so be it. Harry might be forced to live with this hell, but that's not something everyone else has to know about. And that was Voldemort's plan all along – that's why he got a hold on Cuffe in the first place. He planned this." He snorted. "Well, not this."

"Sirius," Lupin said in a low voice, "you're not going to get away from this one. They've got a full strike force surrounding this place, and while there are no Dementors... Sirius, the only way you've got a hope in hell of surviving the next few hours is if you come quietly. Cassane will make sure you get a fair trial –"

It came out of nowhere, dropping out of the black sky above them. Lupin dove backwards towards the motorbike as Sirius' wand shot up, spraying curses –

Curses that either went wide or were deflected, as the cloaked and hooded figure tore up Shield Charm after Shield Charm with a desperate intensity that stunned Lupin – Sirius was an incredible duellist, who was this guy –

"He's not getting a fair trial."

Lupin drew his own wand, even as his mind raced to identify the muffled voice against the roar of the flames, he knew it sounded familiar –

Sirius' eyes blazed with hatred. "You'll never take me alive."

"I don't need either of you alive," the figure snarled, and ripped back his hood. Lupin recognized the man immediately – even though he had never seen the man before, Harry's description had been unmistakable.

"Then what do you want?" Sirius snarled.

"Simple," Kemester hissed. "Answers."

It was unlike anything Harry had ever imagined.

The new chamber was larger than the castle above them. The lights streaking from the tip of Dumbledore's wand could barely be seen from the apex of the cavern. And even despite the light – a grey, formless light that seemed to come from nowhere at all – the chamber seemed impossibly black.

But that wasn't what drew Harry's awestruck gaze, or Tonks' murmured oath. He almost stepped forward – only for Dumbledore's hand to grasp his shoulder very tightly.

"Careful, Harry."

Harry glanced down, and immediately regretted it – because outside of a tiny arch spanning the room, barely half a meter wide, there was no floor in this chamber. It was a chasm, and Harry had the chilling feeling that it was somehow bottomless and inescapable.

But even that wasn't enough to draw his awe. Even despite the impossible dimensions of the hall, the cryptic warnings etched into the wall... nothing had been like this.

It was a sphere of stone, and Harry guessed it was about fifty meters wide. It hung suspended over the void, slowly rotating with a coarse, slow ticking like the tiniest movement of the largest clock on the planet. It was only connected to the rest of the cavern via the slim, unsupported arc – a bridge over nothingness. The sphere itself was a glossy black, simultaneously reflecting and absorbing every light in the chamber, but somehow the gloss looked liquid, almost as if the

sphere was drenched in oil. And all across the rock were silvery metal spines, spraying out of the black stone at random like the prongs of a snowflake. But unlike the stone, they were dull, not reflecting any light whatsoever.

"Professor," Harry asked anxiously, "I think it's fair to say this is something... this is something that the Founders couldn't have –"

"From everything we know about Godric, Helga, Rowena, and Salazar, I would agree," Dumbledore replied, his tone sombre, but Harry could hear some wonder and curiosity creeping in. "In fact, I would suspect that this place was not shaped by them at all, but rather by something beyond our time entirely. When reaching beyond death, Harry, time is both quintessential, and yet insignificant. What is crafted here is both linked to our time and yet outside of it. I suspect that all the Founders may have done – indeed, all they may have needed to do – is reach here and extend their will – and then the mechanism created itself – outside of what we consider time."

"So without any passage of time, there's been no decay, and thus, no dust," Tonks concluded. "And I'm guessing Nott's inside that sphere." Her eyes narrowed. "Probably wherever that control mechanism you were describing is, Harry."

"Hold a moment," Dumbledore said, raising a finger, "for I suspect..." Without warning, the old wizard bent and examined the foot of the stone arc. "Ah. That is unfortunate."

"What now?"

"It's an old language, centuries old," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, "and while it is crude, the meaning is unmistakable – those who are not linked to the sphere cannot enter it."

"What?" Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So you're saying... you're saying we came down here for nothing?"

"Not at all," Dumbledore replied calmly, "because you can enter the sphere."

"But I'm not..." Harry's voice trailed off. "Wait... you're thinking because of the simulamancy, I can get in?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied simply.

"And we're just going to, what, stand back here?" Tonks demanded angrily. "We did not get this far just to send Harry in alone –"

"Agreed," Dumbledore said, a small smile crossing his face, "which is why you and I, Miss Tonks, will be working to provide whatever aid to Harry that we can – and work to cover our escape, for I suspect when Nott is subdued, the magic he is utilizing will break." His eyes hardened. "We may be facing an onslaught of spirits – and here, there are no controls or bonds upon them. Inside the sphere their presence may be blocked, but I suspect the conflict will grow much larger."

"So you're telling me instead of facing some pissant of a Slytherin, we could be facing a horde of hostile ghosts?" Tonks asked, her expression faltering slightly.

"I believe so."

Tonks glanced at Harry. "Want to switch?"

Harry couldn't help but chuckle a bit at that, and he regretted it as soon as he did – the sound felt incredibly out-of-place in the otherworldly cavern. Instead, he simply pulled her into a quiet embrace.

"I love you," he whispered.

He felt Tonks stiffen momentarily, but then she sighed. "Yeah... yeah, I know."

"Okay," Harry breathed, breaking the embrace and looking at Dumbledore. "Good luck, Professor –"

"Hold just a moment, Harry," Dumbledore said, and his eyes unexpectedly twinkled. "Did you think that I would let you enter that

chamber completely unprotected? I might know an enchantment or two that might aid you in your duel."

Harry's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly serious," Dumbledore replied, raising his wand. "Harry, you are a very special young man, and it would be highly irresponsible of me to not grant you every protection I can muster."

Harry suddenly froze – he could have sworn he heard someone laugh...

"What is it, Harry?"

He shook his head. "I could have sworn – never mind."

"Give a reason," Sirius growled, raising his wand and pointing it directly at Kemester. "I can kill him right now and still control the Fiendfyre, and after everything he's done –"

"I'd deserve it," Kemester replied, side-stepping away from Sirius and closer to the edge of the circle of flame around them. "But at this point... you have answers, Black."

"I don't – what the fuck do you want, Kemester? I'm an innocent man! Why would I betray my closest friends –"

Kemester spat on the stone, his face twisting with utter disdain. "Does this look 'innocent' to you? You killed Cuffe – and according to Skeeter, he was one of the two that attacked her at Bonaccord Hall. A convenient way to cover your tracks."

"I killed Cuffe," Sirius said through gritted teeth, and Lupin could tell that there was real sweat coursing down his friend's face, "because he was going to take actions that would ruin my godson's life." His face contorted into a snarl. "You know, the godson you beat into a pulp!"

"And he nearly killed me in response," Kemester spat, "so I'd call us even. But why the protective streak – on the road you tried to kill him –"

"I was possessed, you imbecile!" Sirius roared. "Your lackey saw me save his life from your lot days earlier – do you honestly think I'd try to kill him?"

Kemester's eyes snapped to Lupin. "You buy this, werewolf?"

Lupin coughed as he stood straighter - in his gut, he knew the words he would speak would ultimately decide his fate, likely for worse.

"I do," he said, his voice barely audible above the roar of the flames. "He's telling the truth, and... and although I don't think everything he's done is right –"

"Remus –"

" – He's on our side," Lupin finished, ignoring Sirius. "But what about you? The traitor... it was Reed Larshall, wasn't it? Your partner?"

A muscle in Kemester's scarred face twitched. "Yeah... yeah, it was him, but I want his handler. The one who was really responsible for all of the leaks and attacks –"

"And, what, you think that was me?" Sirius asked incredulously. "I stand against Voldemort, not for him! I'm on your side – I just don't play by your rules."

"My rules are the law!"

"Yeah," Sirius retorted with a sneer, "and how did that work out for you, or your brother, or your father –"

The flurry of curses streaked at Sirius, and Lupin reflexively ducked, but Sirius parried all of them effortlessly.

"You can't beat me, Kemester!" Sirius yelled, twirling his wand as he stepped a little closer. "Those rumours from fourteen years ago about

me being Voldemort's right-hand man wouldn't have been started without a grain of truth! And you knew you weren't going to get anything from me you don't already know – so why are you here? Trying for one last scrap of glory, bring me in to salvage your name and reputation, or whatever's left of it?"

"In a world where evil uses words and good uses Fiendfyre," the scarred Hit Wizard snarled, "anything and everything is possible, as much as we might not want it."

There was something strange, something familiar, in Kemester's voice that sent a chill down Lupin's spine. The man knows coming here, diving in through the roof... he knows it was suicidal. He knows that he's not going to get anything out of Sirius – hell, he knows he's outclassed by Sirius – then why did he...

He understood, even as Kemester lowered his wand.

"Sirius," Lupin began slowly, "he's not going to kill us. He can't."

"How do you know?" Kemester spat.

"Because I recognize that tone in your voice," Lupin replied sadly, fighting back the catch in his throat, "and I've been there."

The Hit Wizard was silent.

"And you thought if you came here, on your own – because the Aurors and Hit Wizards outside don't know you're here, I'm guessing – you could get what you wanted," Lupin continued, ignoring Sirius' startled expression and focusing on the hard, emotionless façade Kemester was maintaining. "And if I wasn't here... it would have been easy. Sirius wouldn't have hesitated."

"Too true," Sirius growled. "Give me one reason and I'll do it right now – this bastard deserves it –"

"Is that what Harry would have wanted?" Lupin demanded.

Sirius paused for a few seconds, and then nodded decisively. "Yeah, fairly certain."

Lupin shook his head. "No... no, that's not how it'll be. Harry can't... no, he can't be tied to this. His life is bad enough as it is." He took a long, deep breath. "Sirius, we need to leave."

Sirius looked at Lupin with scepticism, and then concern. "But Harry –"

"Right now, we make things complicated," Lupin replied sharply. "Harry doesn't need that – no, he can't know this is what we did – at least not now." He glanced at Kemester. "And you... I'm not about to fulfil your death wish. I've been where you were... and taking the coward's way out is never the answer." He shook his head. "I should have learned that long ago. Come on, Sirius."

"I should stop you," Kemester said, his voice both toneless and embittered. "You're both fugitives –"

"Then try," Lupin replied grimly, "and you'll die, and you'll just be one more body on the pile. No moments of glory, no questions, not even much concern – you'll be a footnote, instead of a hero."

Sirius snorted as he climbed up onto his motorbike, his wand still angled at the Hit Wizard. "He's no hero, Remus."

"No," Kemester said, barely audible over the roar of the motorbike's engine. "I'm just... I'm just the man looking for the truth."

Sirius shook his head with disgust as Lupin climbed onto the bike. "Oh yeah? And what did you find?"

"The law, and the fire and blood that surrounds it," Kemester replied, as the Triumph roared. "In short... nothing of substance."

The stone arch wasn't slick – in fact, it was quite easy to balance upon, with the long Ectoplasmic Projector in one hand to balance with – but Harry couldn't help but feel a tremor in his gut every time his nerves got the best of him and he happened to glance down into the

blackness on either side. There was something wrong about that darkness – something that not even the protective enchantments Dumbledore had provided would be able to stave off.

He hastily shook his head and looked at the sphere looming ahead of him. Despite its rotation, the arch still connected to a single door into the sphere. In fact, it seemed that while the sphere still rotated, the door didn't move.

"Focus, Harry," he heard Dumbledore's voice echo out over the void around him. "No spirits have arrived, there is nothing stopping you from entering."

Harry took a deep breath as he stepped a little closer. The open door was within reach now, and he braced himself for impact –

Nothing happened. The stone door slid open at the touch of his fingers, and he heard Tonks give a whoop of triumph. Even in the blackness of the cave, that buoyed his spirits.

Now to just beat one pissant of a Slytherin...

He climbed the obsidian stairs, his eyes taking in everything he saw. The thin white light from the tip of his wand illuminated his distorted reflection in the murky, glossy walls, and he focused on the light up ahead, a light that seemed of many colours and of none all the same time...

He reached the top of the stairs, the widest part of the sphere, and looked into a chamber he had only seen in visions that he'd classify as nightmares.

The floor was glossy and black like the rest of the chamber, but this time there was light everywhere, cascading off of spindles of metal embedded in the ceiling and walls. Harry was abruptly reminded of a picture he had seen in primary school of the Northern Lights, but where all the clouds and mist was sucked away, leaving only stars and waves of energy behind.

In the center of the room was a dais of a greyish-black material Harry didn't quite recognize, and on the dais was a strangely rusted and tarnished podium, with exposed cogs, wire, and chipped, glowing gemstones – and on the podium, about five feet across, was Hogwarts.

Harry couldn't help but be astonished. Illuminated brilliantly from every angle was a scale model of the entire castle and its grounds, sculpted with such intricate detail that Harry only wondered who could have crafted it. It didn't look like any material he was familiar with – in fact, the more he looked at it, the model seemed to blur and flicker, as if it wasn't quite solid...

"Potter."

The voice was filled with raw hatred, and Harry's wand immediately snapped up as a hooded figure stepped out from behind the dais. He hadn't been visible behind the model of Hogwarts, but now Harry could see him. He could see every detail of the young man's wasted face and hollowed eyes, his stringy hair and pallid complexion, his dirty robes and his insane smile. The Slytherin patch on his robes was only barely visible beneath crusted blood and filth.

"Nott," Harry growled, the anger boiling up his gut. The tiniest fraction of his mind felt pity for what had happened to the Slytherin, but Harry shoved that back – this bastard, this creature had enabled Sirius' possession, had attacked Cho and Luna and Colin and Ernie and Su...

And me. No, you're getting mercy, Theodore.

"I'm going to give you one chance," he said aloud, his voice echoing across the chamber. "Dumbledore's waiting outside, and while he's just as furious as I am, you might get mercy. He'll protect you from everyone looking to rip you apart, like Moody and McGonagall and every other student in the school." Harry's eyes hardened. "Including me."

"Have you ever stared into the face of Death, Harry Potter?" Nott whispered, his eyes glinting merrily as he lit his wand, casting the

twisted lines of his face into an even more grotesque light. "Looked into his hollow, glowing eyes and asked him his name? Asked those behind him what they would give to quench their thirst for some grand conclusion to their tale?"

"You brought back spirits that were kept away from Hogwarts for damn good reason!" Harry snarled. "They were gone, we didn't need this!"

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Potter," Nott whispered, "because this – this device the Founders built a millennia ago, built by enslaving Death – this was keeping them from going on. Some wanted to stay behind, yes, yes, but others just wanted to pass – to go down that road beyond all time and space and life itself." Nott shook his head. "I'm not like the Dark Lord, Potter, I do not fear Death, because I have stared into his eyes and asked him his name, promising that I will free him from these bonds."

The insane smile on Nott's face deepened. "And by weaving your little web over the school, simulamancer, you're going to bring all of Hogwarts with me when we dive into the timeless eternal instant that Death offers."

"Voldemort doesn't want you to destroy Hogwarts –"

His statement was cut off by Nott's shrill, uneven laughter.

"Do you... do you think I care?" the Slytherin shrieked with an insane giggle. "The man doesn't understand the glory and majesty that comes after – he seeks to prolong this because that's all he knows and can possibly understand! He hasn't seen the moment beyond the passing, he's only felt the lingering agony of a half-life, one he would prefer than the presence of being beyond such paltry concerns of age and dimension!" Nott's expression darkened. "And he's not the only one – there are others who sin far, far greater."

"What, me?" Harry spat. "Because I use simulamancy –"

"There were only two copies of 'The Book of Inversion and Duplex'," Nott hissed. "You idiot – you haven't seen it yet, even though

everything has been given away, every scrap of information dangling in front of your face, the one who would steal from Death..."

But the Slytherin's snarl vanished, his eyes suddenly alight. "But that doesn't matter, because you're not getting out of here alive to deal with it – I've taken this school to the precipice of eternity, and all it needs is a little push."

Without warning, Nott slammed a hand on the dais. Suddenly, the cogs and loose wire began spinning with a shriek of agonized metal. The chipped gemstones ignited with an internal fire. From inside the mechanism, levers extended from the edge, right below the model of Hogwarts.

Nine levers – three bronze, two gold, two silver, two ebony – arranged in an upward spiral around Hogwarts. Seven levers had been pulled, five so violently pulled that Harry could see shattered gears and twisted metal at their connection. Two levers remained – one silver, one bronze.

Sparks suddenly sprayed the room from both the podium and the spindles of metal around the room, and Harry threw a hand over his face. Everywhere the sparks landed, hot, multi-coloured fires erupted, burning even on the stone.

But wherever they touched him, they fizzled away into nothingness. Dumbledore's enchantments had worked their magic.

And suddenly, Harry knew the words he had to say. There was no feeling of déjà vu now – no, it was certainty. He had been here before, he had said the words before, and he suddenly understood why he saw visions whenever he used simulamancy – he was stepping through Death's timeless sphere, but since he already knew his past, all Death could show him was his future.

A future in which he won. In which Nott couldn't stop him.

He lowered his arm and dropped into a fighting stance. "Not nearly enough," he called out, letting a confident smile dawn on his face. Strangely, he couldn't taste blood in his mouth. I could have sworn...

it doesn't matter, there have been little differences before. "What else you got?"

Nott's eyes flashed, and the Slytherin raised his own wand. The tip of the wand flashed before the matte black whip erupted forth, somehow visible against the black walls...

"Ooh," Harry remarked, cocking an eyebrow. "Kinky."

The whip cracked, erupting in liquid-blue fire, dripping tendrils of liquid flame onto the floor, and for a second Harry could now see the crusted bloodstains –

And then the sphere shook.

Harry was off-balance for a fraction of a second, but he quickly planted his feet as Nott took a firm hold of the podium to hold his balance. A few of the bloodstains on the floor had caught fire now, adding flickers of hot blue light around the chamber to the discordant stream of colours.

"Your little stronghold doesn't seem so strong," Harry shouted, keeping an eye on the flaming whip as he began to circle the podium to get a clear shot at Nott. "Guess Voldemort didn't teach you enough tricks to keep this thing stable –"

"I don't need his tricks," Nott replied, his eyes utterly mad as his smile deepened. "I don't need his luck, or his skill, or anything. You and your friends, on the other hand... ah, they're going to need everything they can get."

And raising a hand that was suddenly soaked in blood, Nott grabbed the last silver lever on the podium and pulled.

Dumbledore had heard the tremor erupt across the sphere, and he immediately angled his wand, prepared for whatever he might see –

"That thing could collapse at any second, Professor," Tonks said anxiously, giving her wand an experimental twist as he steadied the

Ectoplasmic Harpoon. "I think, even if we don't use the bridge, Harry could be – fuck, what the –"

Dumbledore saw it too. Suddenly, the greyish light that seemed to come from nowhere in the chamber had intensified – and it had a source.

For around the sphere, things began to appear. Translucent, hovering over the emptiness, their eyes milky white and glowing softly as they coalesced.

Every set of eyes focused on them, and he could hear Tonks take an involuntary step backwards. And even despite the dozens of spells that leapt to the front of his mind, he couldn't help but feel a moment of unease.

He hadn't expected this many.

"The ghosts of all who have died badly at Hogwarts," he whispered, and even above the growing din of incoherent murmurs from the spirits, he knew Tonks could hear him. "Nott only skimmed the surface..."

All at once, the pupil-less eyes of the ghosts narrowed, fixing on them both. He could hear Tonks' breathing hitch with fear, and he couldn't blame her – souls of students, teachers, and everything in between, known and unknown, for Hogwarts: A History had always been poor in recording the deaths and disappearances throughout the centuries.

"Miss Tonks," he began slowly, "please hand me the Ectoplasmic Harpoon."

She slowly handed him the staff, her hands trembling as the temperature in the chamber plummeted as the spirits began to manifest more fully.

"Thank you," Dumbledore said softly. "Now, I want you to turn around, and run."

"Professor, Harry is –"

"In far less danger than the two of us," he interrupted, the mass of spectres only growing thicker and higher in front of him, raw hatred of the living in their eyes. "I may be able to buy you some time – only one is required to defend the corridor." He turned and looked at Tonks, her hair now matte black, her face only a few shades away from the spirits. "I will follow if I can, but Minerva and Alastor must be prepared."

Tonks blinked rapidly, her eyes growing damp. "I... Professor, I can –"

"I knew the risks when I took this job, Miss Tonks," Dumbledore replied kindly, tapping the Ectoplasmic Harpoon with his wand. Immediately, the spear ignited with white-hot light, sizzling as Dumbledore gave it an experimental swing. "And I cannot see any nobler death than dying for my school. Now run, please."

He didn't turn to see Tonks sprint away – he focused only on the horde of spirits hovering over the void. All of their eyes were now on him – only on him.

Dumbledore only adjusted his spectacles with the edge of his wand, and with a thought, a corona of silver light erupted around him, looking like nothing less than a haze of shooting stars.

His wand and the harpoon blazed with magic, every colour gleaming more brightly as he extended his wand – a challenge. He pointed not at any spirit in particular, but at the floating sphere rotating slowly over the pit, where sparks were spraying from the dulled metal prongs.

"It seems almost cliché," he said aloud, "and my robes are not grey, but I feel at this point, the words are most apt indeed... and while I feel... unworthy to appropriate them, and I have no illusions that they mean anything to you..." Dumbledore allowed himself the barest hint of a smile. "Yes, it is right."

The spirits rose up, their incoherent murmurs blending together into a roar of agonized souls, and Dumbledore's blue eyes blazed with righteous fire.

"I am Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, and you shall not pass."

Immediately, he knew he had made a horrible mistake.

The lever slipped from nerveless hands as he felt a rush of numbness, as if every inch of his body had been submerged in frigid water – but there was something wrong with this numbness, it wasn't cold, it was –

Well, I didn't expect this... but I'll make do.

The voice, echoing and utterly unrecognizable, was in his head..

The voice was in his head.

He struggled to draw breath, pull any air past his lips – but he couldn't. His chest quivered as he tried to inhale – but every muscle was numb.

He was drowning in air.

It wasn't supposed to –

I cannot possess him, the voice interrupted, and despite the numbness, the voice began to gain distinction and character. It was still too low, he couldn't discern the gender, but the part of his mind that wasn't screaming at him had recognized the pattern – and was terrified.

I cannot possess him, he protects himself with his cursed practice, the voice spat, which means it's just you and me – and since you are a Slytherin, it's an easy choice.

He felt some of the numbness fade, and immediately he sucked down a breath – and immediately felt himself sprawling against the cold stone floor, his nose bleeding freely from the curse to his face.

Well, it's clear he's not waiting, the voice said with a sniff, but no matter, I'll deal with him the old-fashioned way. You, though... well, this body is not to my liking.

The numbness faded instantly, and the remaining pieces of Nott's rational mind abruptly coalesced with horror.

And I think, the voice added, with a sultry edge as if she was speaking seductively straight into his ear, that you'll find the change rather... interesting.

Harry kept his guard up as Nott began to thrash on the floor, his voice strangled as he began to shriek with pain. His back arched, his legs thrashed, his wand nearly slipped from his contorting fingers...

"I should end this now," Harry said in a low voice, giving his wand a small twirl as he stepped closer. "But he's unarmed –"

And since when have you cared? his mind retorted. After what he did to Hogwarts, what he did to you, the best thing he deserves is a quick, merciful death.

Harry gritted his teeth and summoned all of his rage and hatred to the front of his mind – and it wasn't hard.

"Avada –"

The air was blasted out of his lungs as he sprawled backwards, skidding across the slick stone floor. His wand didn't slip from his fingers – Dumbledore had given him a charm that kept the contact between his hand and his wand rather sticky – but it took him a few seconds to get back on his feet –

And what he saw was the stuff of nightmares.

Nott was suspended in the air, held up by invisible meat hooks, his limbs nerveless and uncontrolled as waves of magic washed over him. His wand, which was somehow still in his hand, seemed to still

be moving of its own accord, dragging Nott's arm along with every motion in a grotesque dance.

But as unnerving as that was, it wasn't that which disturbed Harry. He couldn't take his eyes away as Nott's arms and legs seemed to thrash at random, twisting and contorting in ways muscles don't allow – but then again, it looked as though the muscles were sloughing away inside the skin, skin that seemed to tighten and twist into a new shape. It was as if Nott was a corpse suspended in the air, drinking the worst batch of Polyjuice Potion ever brewed.

His robes changed too, the filth and dirt vanishing as the cloth seemed to twist and tighten into a new shape, emphasizing curves and assets that the Slytherin boy didn't possess – and from the look of horror in his eyes, that he never wanted to possess...

Harry took a deep breath. "Flamma lacero!"

The arc of fire, superheated to blue-white by an enchantment Dumbledore had provided, vanished an instant before it made contact. Harry squinted, trying to look past the transformation – it looked as if the spell had been blinked out of existence, leaving only a faint outline of blue sparks –

"No... no no no, NO!"

Nott yanked his head back as if somebody had grabbed the back of his hair – hair was softening, lengthening, twisting into an intricate knot as the muscles on his face warped and twisted –

"Fuck... atrum chain levitas!" Harry shouted, thrusting his wand outwards.

Lightning erupted forth – only to vanish into outlines of blue sparks an instant later.

"AVADA KE –"

The spell came out of nowhere, connecting right under his chin. He felt his feet leave the floor as he slammed hard against the ground, his teeth vibrating with the impact –

"That... was rude."

Harry blinked rapidly as he shot upwards, his wand already rising for another curse as he saw the transformation continue. He saw the face, a blend of Nott's features with something feminine and coldly striking. He saw budding nubs of flesh begin to swell on Nott's chest, his robes expanding to reflect the transformation...

But even despite the change in front of him, his mind was somewhere else. I know that voice... I remember hearing it before... the tower...

Immediately, his mind jumped to a spell he knew had worked before.

"Mens fragor, mens fragor!"

The blue orbs erupted from his wand – and immediately vanished. Harry's righteous shout died in his throat.

The figure now standing before him only had the barest shadow of Nott in his – no, her – appearance. Hair that had once been matted and filthy was now sleek and pulled back into a tightly coiled braid, tied with a silver ribbon. Robes that had been covered with vomit and blood were now a spotless dress that seemed to shimmer with magic, yet drew attention to all the right places. Even the blood on her hands was gone.

Only in her large, dark eyes was there a shadow of Nott's madness and hatred, otherwise completely unseen behind striking features and a beauty that seemed lethal as it was sensual.

And I don't feel attracted to her in the slightest, Harry suddenly realized, his eyes brightening. There's no warmth, there's nothing real there – with Tonks, there's something there, there's something real, something magical –

"Oh, there's something magical all right."

The voice didn't match her appearance. It was a blend of a woman's with Nott's, as if two people were speaking at the same time over each other – and both voices were in Parseltongue.

Harry's wand snapped up. "You can't read my mind –"

The woman gave a sniff. "I see what's on the surface – although it's very clear you don't. If you only had that insight... ah, you'd be that perfect weapon that the Headmaster so desires." Her wand rose. "Instead you're the imperfect weapon, the notched sword, the bent wand. Such things are only needed for scrap." A cruel smile grew across her face. "And here I thought you had a chance to learn something before we fought again."

And then he got it, and white-hot rage surged through him.

"You were the Slytherin ghost that possessed Luna –"

"I told you I'd see you in Hell," the woman replied smoothly, effortlessly switching between Parseltongue and English and back again, giving the wand a little twirl as she stepped forward. "But then again, imperfect blades don't get to the bottom of the Pit – they end up broken on the precipice. And that takes us here. And unlike you, I've been down and back, sought to defeat Death as my heritage requires I rise to do." Her eyes narrowed. "And all I need to do is crush the insect in front of me to reclaim my position."

It was as if Reality had returned, and slapped him in the face.

Here I am, Harry thought, his gut shrivelling with sudden fear, up against a witch who's probably way out of my depth – at least from the way she's talking she is – and I still have no idea how to stop that damned mechanism that keeps freeing the spirits –

He glanced at the Hogwarts model as his mind raced – it had something to do with that podium, he needed to do something to it –

He only barely saw it coming, and he dove to the side – even as a giant, glowing boot made of energy streaked down and smashed into the rock, only inches away from where he was.

"I crush insects," the witch hissed, "but I suppose fire works just as well. *Abyssus incendia!*"

It erupted like a torrent out of her wand, dragons and serpents of living fire streaking towards him. Harry dove to the side again as the inferno slammed against the stone, but he could see it racing back towards him, even as he was scrabbling across the floor –

Got you.

Without warning, he wasn't on the floor anymore – the front of his robes was in her hand, and they were on the dais, only feet away from the inferno that was sweeping around the room, surrounding them all in a cyclone of fire.

Harry instinctively swung the Ectoplasmic Projector, but she easily dodged it, sketching a magical symbol in the air that blazed with hot blue flame –

There was nowhere left to run – the dais was only a few meters wide, and all around him was fire and the spell was already streaking towards him –

"*PARIETIS!*"

The invisible wall of force erupted into being, stopping the flaming symbol inches from Harry's face and reflecting it backwards into the inferno around them.

The inferno abruptly turned blue-white, and Harry blinked back tears at the sudden burst of light as he tried to take aim at the blurry shadow that was sweeping closer, her gown now blazing with magic –

His curse went wide again, and suddenly, her wand was up, and there was no time to block –

CRACK.

This time, it wasn't just lines of tarnished silver and gold washing over his eyes – now he could see faint black lines criss-crossing everything as the witch stepped back, a foul expression on her face.

"So you took another simulacrum," she snarled over the roar of the fire around them. "Daring indeed, simulamancer, but the wonderful thing about that instant of death that goes on forever is that it gives you a lot of time to think – and considering how tied I am to this, it wasn't hard for me to figure out how I can sever the connection."

Harry's eyes widened, and his wand immediately shot up. What is she –

"Simulamancy, after all," the witch continued, an evil smile spreading on her face, "is linked to the gender divide – the vast dichotomy that creates an essential extenuating condition – so what happens if I change that?"

Harry tried to deflect it, but she was too fast. The spell hit him in the chest.

He was standing on the barren, mottled-grey wasteland again, facing the wall that merged with the sky, the black iron door.

Su Li was there, her naked torso and head embedded in the metal, but it was different this time. This time around her shoulders and waist, there was cracks in the iron.

Her face was impassive, but her eyes told him everything he needed to know.

Harry laboured to breathe. "Why... why am I here –"

Su's eyes flashed with supreme disdain – she wasn't going to tell him anything, even as pain began racing up all of his nerves –

"Okay," Harry gasped, dropping to his knees even as his legs buckled. He felt his center of gravity shift violently, but he recognized the feeling – he had been in his simulacra before, he knew what was happening. "She... she's trying to transform me, but why am I –"

There was the splintering of metal, and Harry could see something twitch behind Su's shoulder – as if there was an arm behind it, that hadn't been torn away...

And then he understood. "She's... she's trying to transform me into... and since there's a connection between us, it's ultimately going to be..."

His voice trailed off. "But the simulacra will break when it happens," he whispered, and he could already hear his voice becoming more feminine as he watched his body warp, the pain strangely muting. "The dichotomy –"

The iron holding the other shoulder cracked. Her expression did not change as she bent at the waist, her arms sliding free from sockets behind her back that Harry hadn't noticed....

He felt lumps growing on his chest, and long hair dropping over his face, which he knew was changing. His glasses shattered as they fell to the ground. He tried to breathe, to say something, but his jaw felt stiff, as if it was locked in place, his lips sealing shut even as an icy voice erupted inside his head –

- let's see how YOU like it-

Her legs burst free, and Harry couldn't scream as his muscles went limp abruptly, some force dragging him like a broken doll towards the wall, shoving him against the iron, his robes evaporating into grey mist, exposing pale breasts –

-lessons need to be learned. you will PAY for your crime above crimes. this will allow the balance to be maintained. i can and will stop her, but only if YOU STAY HERE –

He tried to scream, to say something, but it was as if he didn't have lips on his face. He felt his arms and legs wrench back, sliding into the iron that chewed away on deadened nerves and flesh...

-but here's the catch. she's freed me, and i am fully aware you have hooks in me as well. things will go back to as they were when i end it, and wisdom will come with you leaving me ALONE. but when you realize the truth that you have ignored, you will set her free. you will set her free. YOU WILL SET HER FREE. i do not care if you accept the devil's deal, but YOU WILL SET HER FREE-

Harry couldn't speak, but even as the iron dragged his torso and head against the wall, he managed a nod. Su seemed satisfied with that.

-enjoy the silence.

Her eyes opened.

Immediately, she could feel the heat of the blue flames circling around them, but she ignored it. She ignored the triumphant shriek of the witch, who was already shouting another curse, one that would seize her mind –

But she was already moving. Her muscles brimming with enchanted strength from the Headmaster's charms, she pounced upwards onto the podium, crouching over the 'model' of the castle. Her lank black hair cast a long, forbidding shadow even as she slid her wand back as her hand drifted along the side of the podium, searching for it –

"What are you –"

She saw the sudden moment of fear in the other witch's eyes, but she didn't care. She raised the Ectoplasmic Projector above the glimmering Astronomy Tower and thrust downwards.

Immediately she could hear the rumble of shattering stones far above her that sounded like nothing more than the spear of a god piercing the school, but that was only a piece. She needed one last step... one last moment.

The cycle is complete.

Her fingers found the last bronze lever.

When she pulled it, it snapped.

Everything went white.

In the cavern outside of the sphere, every spirit let out a howl that caused thin rivulets of blood to trickle from Dumbledore's ears – a howl only lasting for an instant.

Every prong of metal on the sphere exploded into sparks – and when the blinding light had vanished a few seconds later, the spirits were gone.

The sphere hovering over the pit groaned, its slow spin grinding to a halt. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, Dumbledore could hear the breaking of stone –

His wand snapped out. "WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!"

Immediately he could feel the strain as he struggled to suspend the massive black sphere as the arch crumbled away beneath it, but even with his magic enhanced, he knew he couldn't hold it for long – but he needed to get Harry out of there, and he was out of options –

"Fawkes!"

He heard the trill of phoenix song, and his heart leapt in his chest as he saw Fawkes soar above him with a flash of fire and red-gold plumage. His will hardened, and he redoubled his efforts to keep the sphere aloft even as the phoenix tried to sink her claws into the orb of stone –

Her claws found no purchase on the stone, and immediately Dumbledore's hope began to fade, but he wasn't about to give up now...

He could feel sweat stinging his eyes as his mind raced – there was one more option, a spell he had only seen Tom cast non-verbally, but perhaps he could do it, if he moved fast enough –

"Fawkes, to me!"

The phoenix soared close, and even Dumbledore grasped the plumage, he felt his feet leave the ground. He didn't know the words of Tom's incantation, but he knew what it did, and with the wand in his hand... it should be enough.

He extended his wand as Fawkes flew about ten meters beneath the shuddering sphere, his levitation spell barely holding. But he wouldn't need to hold it for much longer.

And then he would have just over a second. Just over a second.

He caught the phoenix's eye, and somehow he knew Fawkes understood.

"Fawkes... now."

He dropped the levitation spell and immediately poured all of his intent into his wand, trusting that somehow the wand would understand his desperate plea. Even behind his glasses, tears filled his eyes as Fawkes rocketed through the air, just beneath the speed of sound as the sphere began to plummet...

CRACK.

The hole in space was open, and the sphere fell through.

The Astronomy Tower had been split apart, and had been crashing down, masonry and stonework tumbling towards the ceilings of the rest of the castle –

But then it stopped.

A blink later, the Tower had been restored.

But somehow, every boulder and shard of stone and shingle and wood remained broken. Driven outside of the tower by the instant of repair, they hung like a cloud of debris around the tower, never to fall.

A kaleidoscope of colours cascaded over Hogwarts again, driven by flickering, silvery lines. But this time, every single thread turning a burning blue-white, driving every colour to searing vibrancy, as if every instant of the sun's light lost in the emptiness of the time sink was finally shining forth...

The blast that came a few seconds later levelled every sapling fifty meters around the school, broke several windows in Honeydukes, and shattered every bottle of liquor in Hogsmeade.

In a ruined shack a few miles away from a deserted, stately manor, a golden box hidden behind an arsenal of enchantments exploded with white-hot light. The ring inside of it evaporated to nothingness, leaving only a small, dark stone behind.

In a subterranean cave beneath an ocean cliff, a lake of corpses collectively shuddered – and then exploded into a cloud of gore.

In a manor only recently abandoned, a massive map on the world hanging on a wall ignited, burning to scraps in seconds before the flames inexplicably faded away.

Past a long, dark corridor and a black door, a dozen glass spheres on dusty shelves exploded.

A stack of hourglasses on gold chains cracked, spilling precious sand across the chamber as their enchantments died.

And in a room that had once held only an archway and a veil and now held so much more, a mechanism that had only moved sporadically now began to whirl with energy, its master slowly nodding with satisfaction, a single tear streaking his face.

One instant, he was embedded in iron, his mind screaming in hopeless rage at the grey emptiness...

And then he was free, on hands and knees on the ground, his breath heaving, his lips unsealed, staring down at the ground through his glasses –

His glasses.

Harry looked wildly down at himself. His robes had been restored, his glasses repaired, his body restored to normal – even though he had no idea how long he had been sealed away – it felt like forever, even though he knew it was probably only an instant –

-you're welcome-

He looked up, only to see Su Li standing over him, a supremely disdainful expression on her face.

"Did you," he asked desperately, scrabbling to his feet, "did you get –"

-it's not over. while the abomination may have been driven back, the true crime has not yet been solved. you will be free to return to your body, and I will return to mine-

Su Li's eyes narrowed dangerously, and Harry quickly took a step back.

-but you and i will know this, and know the connection – it was your dangerous choice, not mine –

"I was never going to use your body for a simulacrum," Harry said quickly. "I only needed it –"

-for this. in the end, the choice is yours. i have used your cords to guide you to where it all began – the Headmaster did the rest – but from here on, i can do nothing more-

"T-Thank you," Harry whispered. "I'm sorry."

Su Li shrugged, her dark gaze drifting past him to stare at the broken iron door.

-death is only a timeless instant before the step onwards – but as you should know by now, if you get stuck in a instant, you can't get out.

He awoke in pain.

"Shit... lumos."

His wand lit up, and Harry groaned as he wiped a smear of blood from his nose and mouth – from the looks of things, and from the blood splattered across the top of the podium and the floor, he had really taken a hit when –

He paused, his thoughts racing with confusion. Where was he? The chamber around him looked similar as the one he'd left, but all of the silvery prongs had vanished, and the 'model' of Hogwarts on the podium was gone. And besides the thin light of his wand, everything had gone out.

He rose cautiously to his feet, quickly scanning the room, searching for anything that he could see –

He saw a vaguely human-shaped smear of blood and grit on the floor, and he grimaced. From the looks of things, there was nothing left of Nott to salvage.

"Guess I just need to get out of here," he whispered, quickly finding the door and stumbling down the uneven stairwell. He kept a firm hand on the wall, but even that felt like it was crumbling beneath his fingers, vanishing away...

He reached the bottom of the stairs and the exit... and his mouth fell open with shock.

He wasn't standing in a hall of impossible dimensions anymore. There was no long archway to a narrow corridor, and Dumbledore was nowhere in sight.

Instead, he saw a hall with a very visible ceiling, palely lit by candles with blue fire and glimmering torches. The entire hall reminded him of a cathedral – a cathedral filled with high, dusty wooden shelves, stacked with glass spheres of every size and shape. Each sphere was coated in dust, and there was a dim light leaking from each, giving the entire hall an unearthly glow. A few shelves had collapsed – and from the destroyed masonry and rock surrounding them, Harry guessed that the sphere's arrival had caused that, but most of the room was intact.

He wiped a trickle of blood from his nose as he frowned and shivered – it was frigid inside the hall. "What the... where the hell –"

"It's the Hall of Prophecy."

Harry's ears perked up – he knew that voice. But why is he –

"For you," Nathan Cassane said quietly, stepping out of the shadows from behind one of the shelves and adjusting the edge of his robes, "it's where it all began – or, at least to most people. The prophecy about your birth was made here, and was kept here, until Voldemort stole it."

Cassane gave a long, shuddering sigh, blinking quickly as he finally met Harry's eyes. "But enough about that – you're here, and that's what's important. Forget the past."

He stretched out his hand. "Let's go for a walk, Harry – it's about time we talk about your future."

Author's Note: so we come to the end. One chapter and the epilogue after this, but here, I think, is the chapter most of you are looking forward the most of all - the one with some answers. I can only hope the pay-off is earned.

As always, read, review, criticize, and enjoy!

-Silens

I am in the eye of a hurricane of fire – an eye that will soon close.

I let them go. I could have raised my wand and launched a spell, ripped the engine from the motorbike and sent them tumbling into the flames they created... but I did not.

Instead I let them go. I let them fly to whatever freedom they dare to seek. I don't know where they plan to go – and the more I think about it, the less I care.

I stare into the fire and I wonder why. Does the law, something I grew up revering and trusting and fighting for... does it all mean nothing? Am I as bad as Parkinson, viewing the law with a cynical eye, using it for naught but exploitation?

Or am I like my father, believing and enforcing a law that has only damned us?

I hear a rumble around me – the Fiendfyre spell will collapse soon under the weight of the counterspell. My broom is gone – tossed aside when I dove into the eye of the inferno. The Anti-Apparition enchantments bar me from fleeing away.

I have walked to my own gallows.

"My future?" Harry asked with confusion, stepping away from the sphere and stumbling over the debris. "I... I don't – what?"

Cassane shook his head. "Come on." He gestured for Harry to come closer. "We have a long walk ahead of us."

"Are we allowed to be here?" Harry demanded, pulling his robes tighter around him – the room really was freezing cold. "I mean, isn't the Department of Mysteries off-limits?"

"Not for me," Cassane clarified, and for a half-second, Harry thought he could see a hint of a smile cross the man's face. "Fudge gave me official permission to work here after the Azkaban attack and some arm-twisting, but I was already doing some things here from..." He paused with thought. "I think I first came down here during the Ministry attack, after I freed Remus and helped the Weasley twins trigger the goblin explosives." He chuckled grimly. "Nobody even noticed I was gone."

Harry's mind raced. "Okay... so you were down here working with Bode, getting the materials we needed for Hogwarts, the Ectoplasmic Harpoon and Projector."

"Good thinking, Harry," Cassane said lightly, resuming his walk, Harry hastening to keep up. "And you're mostly correct, too – I needed to make sure everything was in place once you started using them, and I must say this, they worked masterfully."

"So all the spirits, they're all here?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes, and well-contained." Cassane gave Harry a nod of satisfaction. "In all honesty, I didn't think it would work – I didn't even think it was possible –" He coughed, and quickly cleared his throat. "But – but it was, and you can't imagine how impressed I am."

"Well, thanks," Harry replied awkwardly, not really knowing what to say. Something about the way Cassane was talking seemed a bit off... "So what now? I think Hogwarts is safe –"

"Hogwarts will not come to harm, and I suspect the time distortion is gone as well," Cassane said calmly. "Now granted, I'm not entirely certain of all of the variables, but here's my theory." He glanced at Harry. "Have you ever heard of the Muggle theory regarding travelling at the speed of light?"

"Uh..."

Cassane rolled his eyes. "Thought not. Basically, if one travels at the speed of light, to that person's perception, time seems to stop. However, if we consider that something moving that fast must have an astronomical amount of energy, what would happen if the energy was bled away?"

Harry frowned as he thought. "I... I guess that would mean that the person wouldn't be travelling that fast anymore..."

Cassane winced sympathetically. "Either that or mass would have to be removed, from what I understand. But that's Muggle science, some of which even I barely understand, but I suspect the principles remain mostly the same. When the spirits were blasted out of Hogwarts by whatever you did and redirected here, their link to the time stop – already unstable due to your simulamancy and the sheer amount of time for which the school had been out of synch – was shattered, which explosively returned Hogwarts to the 'regular' time stream." He sighed. "Granted, it's just a theory, and not a good one at that, because I haven't had a chance to take any data, but I believe Hogwarts has now reverted back to our time."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, some sort of victory – about damn time. "It makes sense to me, if that means anything. Dumbledore said that the chamber where we took Nott down was 'outside of time' or something, and I..." He swallowed hard – he didn't want to bring up what Su Li had told him, something about that whole encounter had just screamed unnatural. "I was told that 'death was only a timeless instant, before the step onwards'. So maybe without the souls there, the integrity of the chamber collapsed – does that make any sense?"

"Perhaps a bit," Cassane replied with a shrug. "All I know is that whatever you did, you caused a bit of a mess down here. Every Time-Turner the Ministry keeps is in the Department of Mysteries, and they all split open. A bunch of these orbs," he gestured to the glass balls lining the shelves, "broke open too – guess nobody's going to know or care what those prophecies were saying."

He glanced at Harry. "But perhaps that's a good thing, don't you think?"

Harry shifted, a little taken aback by the sudden change in topic. "I... I dunno, really. I mean, knowing what's coming was kind of great, when I was facing Nott – I mean, I knew he couldn't actually stop me, there was still parts of the simulamancy vision that hadn't happened yet."

Cassane's gaze hardened slightly. "Prefer to rely on destiny, then?"

"In cases where I'm going to benefit from it," Harry retorted, "I don't see why not."

"So what about the prophecy where you are supposedly the only one who can kill Lord Voldemort?" Cassane asked with a twisted smirk. "The entire world benefits from that one."

"Oh, come on," Harry replied with a snort, "you don't even believe in that. Hell, you burst out laughing when I told you about it the first time, when I was trying to convince you to join our side!"

"Because prophecies only have as much power as we choose to give them," Cassane replied, unable to stop a small smile from crossing his lips. "Certainly Voldemort believes in it – hell, he stole it from this very Hall last August, because he wanted to know the whole truth. And more importantly, he has been relying on your belief in it as well." Cassane's smile faded as he looked away. "Because he knows if you are driven to the very edge by attacks on all sides – not attacks directly on you, but on your friends and those you love, that you'll come for him unprepared, and he'll strike you down."

Harry couldn't help but feel a queasy feeling rising in his gut. "I... look, I'm not going to go hunting for Voldemort yet, I could barely take down Nott and that evil Slytherin spirit possessing him –"

"Nott chose to be possessed himself?" Cassane interrupted, his eyes lighting up with interest. "That sounds... well, insane."

"Yeah, it was," Harry replied with a shudder. "It was some insane evil witch, she transformed Nott into some blend of the two of them, and it was creepy as hell. She had been the one to possess Luna, and she spoke Parseltongue –"

Cassane stiffened. "Did she, now?"

"Yeah..." Harry's voice trailed off. "Do you have any idea who she might have been?"

"A witch that appeared twice in the 'life cycle', was a Slytherin, spoke Parseltongue, and behaved like a demon from Hell itself?" Cassane shook his head bitterly. "From the description, it sounds like one Clare Peverell, former student and Professor at Hogwarts from the eighteenth century. A bit of an infamous tale, too."

"Why?"

"Because the Headmistress burnt her at the stake on Hogwarts grounds."

Harry stopped cold. "What?"

"And if the story is true," Cassane continued grimly, "she felt every second of the flames. No Flame-Freezing Charm, this witch burned by the same Fiendfyre she was teaching her students to use."

"She taught Defense Against The Dark Arts, didn't she?" Harry murmured.

Cassane snorted. "Of course she did. The interesting thing about Miss Peverell is that apparently she also disappeared for almost a whole year at Hogwarts, during a Triwizard Tournament that was being hosted there. She had been selected as a champion, and in the Third Task, she just vanished." Cassane frowned. "If she had died, it would explain why she attacked you twice, but one must wonder how she would have come back..."

"Maybe she used some twisted form of simulamancy," Harry said, scratching the back of his neck. "Her ghost knew what it was – and if

she was really as evil as you say, it might explain why there were no records of it anywhere."

"Maybe," Cassane muttered, and it was clear from his expression that he didn't quite buy that explanation. "The Peverells have always had a nasty habit of meddling with Death, though, so you have to wonder..."

He sniffed, his voice dropping lower. "And they're not the only ones..."

...while the abomination may have been driven back, the true crime has not been solved...

Harry froze in mid-step.

"Something wrong?"

Harry shook his head. My own mind is playing tricks on me – it doesn't help this place is dark and creepy as hell... "Nothing, I'm just scaring myself."

Cassane cocked an eyebrow. "Well, don't do that."

"And I can't help but feel like someone's watching me down here," Harry continued, trying to keep his voice even as he glanced down the dark aisles.

Cassane smiled approvingly. "Well done, Harry. It's because somebody is watching you, albeit magically through a scrying spell. Fine job noticing it, by the way, most wouldn't. And it's Miss Delacour, to be precise."

Harry's mouth fell open. Fleur's here? "Are you... so you're telling me instead of her vanishing or going back to France, she's been –"

"Working for me, yes," Cassane replied primly, his smile growing.

"But why?" Harry demanded. "If she's been here the whole time, why didn't you tell me –"

"Because it wasn't relevant," the older man replied simply. "As for why she was working for me... well, let me just say it was a necessary contingency plan, considering the maw of the Ministry was closing in on her. Scrimgeour had long suspected she was up to something, and instead of going to the French Ambassador, who was confined within the Ministry along with the rest of the international delegates and journalists, she came to me instead for asylum." Cassane's smile tightened. "And a good thing she did – if she had gone to the ambassador, she likely would have been dead."

"But why work for you?" Harry asked with growing bewilderment.

"Because I pay well, offer good benefits, and excellent protection?" Cassane replied with a wink at Harry. "Don't worry, I've kept her well out of danger – in fact, until very recently, I needed to make sure she remained quite safe." He let out a long breath. "Granted, the girl does have an impulsive streak – I was nearly scared half to death when I thought I saw her in the Department of Magical Finance in January."

"You were there?"

"I had a meeting with O'Sanden, to iron out some transfers, make sure my gold was in the right places," Cassane replied coolly. "I didn't expect to see 'Miss Delacour' there with you, Skeeter, and that insane Hit Wizard Kemester. It wasn't until later that I spoke with Miss Delacour and determined it was Tonks there instead." He snorted. "And frankly, I should have known better. I panicked for no good reason, but seeing Skeeter there was unnerving. That bloody woman is useful, but she has a terrible habit of poking her nose where it doesn't belong. I'm not surprised Greyback burned down her apartment and Parkinson tried to have her killed at Bonaccord Hall." Cassane's eyes hardened. "But rest assured, had she betrayed me, I wouldn't have been kind."

Harry took a deep breath as he tried to process everything that Cassane had told him. It was a lot to take in, and he didn't really know what question to ask next. He guessed he'd have a lot of time – wherever they were going, they weren't getting there very fast – the Hall of Prophecy seemed to go on forever.

"So this... this is the Department of Mysteries," he began hesitantly.

Cassane nodded. "Quite something, isn't it?"

"What have you been working on down here?" Harry asked, glancing at the shelves of prophecies. "It can't just be the spirit problem at Hogwarts, if you've been down here since the Ministry attack."

Cassane took a deep breath. "It... it's not an easy thing to explain, Harry. It's rather complex."

"We just talked about magical relationships between time, space, and death," Harry argued exasperatedly. "I think I can handle it."

"It's not just the complexity," Cassane said softly, closing his eyes. "I... I am not proud of everything I have done here – the sort of magic I have chosen to work with is not that which can be easily explained – or justified. That's why I've chosen to do my work here, away from prying eyes."

Harry thought of Su, and swallowed hard. "Believe me, I get it."

Cassane's hand trembled, and Harry could tell the older man was struggling to maintain his composure. "No," he murmured, "no... you really, really don't."

"Nathan, I've seen the memories," Harry said, trying to sound kind instead of frustrated and impatient. "Look, I saw what happened to your wife and daughter, and... and I saw Snape's memories too, I know what happened with the group and my parents and... I just want to say I understand."

Cassane took a deep breath, and he met Harry's eyes. "Harry, I cannot promise that you will not hate me or wish me dead before I am finished."

"Well, I'll decide that," Harry replied firmly.

"Very... very well," Cassane replied. The wizard set his jaw, and they continued walking.

"This story... no, this explanation... it begins and ends with my cowardice."

I can see the serpents, the manticores and dragons.

I can see them lurking in the inferno as the circle of protective magic begins to crumble. I can see their hunger for the man standing beyond their reach, the man who voluntarily dove into the maw of the demon.

But this hopeless time, unlike Azkaban, I don't feel anger or hatred or fear or indignity. For I have chosen this path, this suicidal swan dive.

Does it make me insane?

No, I think, shaking my head slowly. I am not insane. I have not lost my mind or rationality – and at the same time, I have not lost my emotions either. I am still a man.

A bitter, damaged, husk of a man, but a man just the same.

So am I suicidal?

It seems more likely. The feeling of despair is hard to argue with, and reflecting upon the past months, it is hard to see my value. I have been neither protagonist nor antagonist – just an irritant, clawing his way to the truth.

A truth I haven't found. The truth I long held has proven to be nothing but hollow – and one must question what I have done, whether or not my mission, my goals, my very existence...

Whether it mattered. Whether it had meaning, or was just pointless drivel.

So perhaps I am suicidal... but I've always lived with the maxim that suicide is the coward's way out.

So am I a coward?

This I know. This, a truth I can state unequivocally, is something I can cling to.

For I stand inside a ring of hell, and I am not afraid. I do not fear what comes ahead. I do not fear the pain. I do not fear the coming darkness.

After everything I've seen, after everything I've done, after everything I've felt and experienced...

When your life is a living hell, you cannot fear death. And it takes a brave man to set aside that fear of the unknown and face the inevitable choice to step towards eternity.

I do not fear death.

I am not a coward.

"Let me begin with a question that might seem callous," Cassane said slowly, taking a deep breath. "Harry, do you remember your parents?"

Harry blinked. "Well... outside of your memories and Snape's memories and..."

His voice trailed off as he remembered the clamminess, the chill through his body at their approach...

"And what?"

"I used to hear my mum and dad," Harry said, his voice very quiet, "when the Dementors got close, before I could use the Patronus Charm. I used to hear Voldemort coming to kill them."

There was silence for a long few seconds, and then Harry felt Cassane's hesitant hand on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't wish that on anyone," the older man said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Is it relevant?" Harry demanded, unable to keep the anger leaking into his voice.

"It is, but not exactly in the way you might think," Cassane replied, and it seemed to Harry that the man was carefully weighing every word. "You see, I knew Lily and James – James more, simply because I knew his father and I saw him grow up." Cassane shook his head as a wistful smile touched his lips. "You have no idea how much you're like him, Harry... no idea..."

"Everyone says that."

"But let me ask," Cassane continued, "a slightly more... awkward question, if you will indulge me: do you think you ever knew Lily or James?"

Harry frowned. "I... well, they were my mum and dad, and I saw the memories –"

"A shade different, I'm afraid," Cassane interrupted, his voice both kind and reproofing. "You know them through the perspective of others, from who they were from another point of view. You know as well as anyone that such points of views can be biased simply by the environment in which you see them."

"Okay, but even still, I think I can get the fair gist of who they were from that!" Harry argued indignantly. "You can't see that much bias in memory, particularly not from a Pensieve –"

But Cassane was shaking his head. "But even with that, Harry, and even with the empathy I know you have... even though I know you can empathize with them, seeing how they lived and what they experienced... it's a photograph, Harry. It's an image outside of time. You might as well just be reading a book or watching a Muggle film."

"That doesn't make the emotions any less valid!"

"True, but it does make the emotions less..." Cassane blinked twice and glanced away, and Harry could see that the man was struggling to hold onto his composure. "I'm sorry, Harry – old memories..."

Harry took a deep breath – he knew that it was only one thing that would make Cassane lose his composure like this. "This... this is about Cassandra and Phoebe, right?"

Cassane nodded quietly.

"You... you still miss them?" Harry asked.

"You can't imagine," Cassane whispered, "what it was like..."

"Yes, I can," Harry said quickly, trying to keep his voice sympathetic. "Look, I... I remember when Voldemort killed Cedric Diggory last year – I... it was hard, it was horrible, knowing that he was gone –"

"I held her body in my arms," Cassane said quietly. "Both of them. You saw it – you saw me go to the ruined house. You saw me collapse in the ashes, holding onto them desperately, praying to every god I never believed in that they would come back, that somehow they would come back..."

And even despite the fact it wasn't his memory, Harry could see it clearly in his mind...

"It was quick," Dolohov replied quietly. "She asked for it... in the end."

"Why didn't you try and save her?" Cassane screamed, his entire body shaking with emotion as he tore his gloves off and pulled his wand free. "Why did you let this happen? Why –"

"REGINA'S DEAD!"

The words stopped Cassane in a second, and his mouth fell open. "But..."

"What happened to protecting her, Nathan?" Dolohov roared, his own eyes wild with sorrow and fury, mirroring Cassane's. "What

happened? Instead, she's fucking dead! The Ministry came for her just like they came for me, and she fought and... and –"

"Antonin, I didn't know – it doesn't mean y-you should –"

"WHY NOT?" Dolohov yelled, yanking his hood back. "It's always been them! It's always been the rest of the world that ruins people like us! And no matter how fucking hard we try and save them, they piss all over it and ruin our lives! EVERY-FUCKING-TIME! SO FUCK IT! I'M DONE!"

Dolohov's words were ragged, as if they were ripped straight from his throat, but he didn't say a word until Cassane stood.

"I'm not gonna kill you, Nathan – not today. He wants you to live, you know." Dolohov blinked twice and ran a hand across his eyes. "He wants you to become like me."

"I'll never join him," Cassane whispered hoarsely.

Dolohov shook his head sadly as he picked up a battered broom leaning against the ruined wall. "Nathan... in his books, you already have. It's all part of the plan... he said one dead wife deserves another... but he's already won. I'm just there because there are people that need to die and meet their justly deserved hell – you know, the one we were already going to."

"You could have saved her," Cassane whispered.

"I did," Dolohov replied quietly as he mounted the broom, "and I only wish I could save you too. Save yourself, Nathan –please."

And now Cassane's voice was dark, deep and hoarse as old memories surged to the surface. "But there was no peace... not for him, and not for me. I knew it wasn't him who was responsible for this. I knew the man – no, not a man, but a craven wretch of a creature that didn't dare face me in person, but chose to strike at me through those I loved most. And the worst part of all was that he knew it would work. He knew I would be driven to rage and further, that I would stop at nothing to utterly destroy him and everything he stood for."

Harry blinked, the memory of Hermione's terrified face as he clasped her torn robes around her and ran vivid in his mind. "I know..."

"I told you a few times, Harry, that I don't remember those days," Cassane said grimly, "and for the most part, that is true. I do not remember the days." He closed his eyes, his face contorting into a snarl. "No, I remember the panicking, horrified faces. I remember the terrified screams, the sprays of blood across the wallpaper, the skeletons charred into ash, the houses erupting in flames. I remember standing with Crouch as he authorized the Unforgivable Curses to be used against Voldemort's army. I remember looking into Dumbledore's eyes and telling him the most recent body count as my team killed everything and anything in their path." Cassane's hand clenched into a fist. "And I don't remember a single moment of regret.

"But there, I think, came the first indications of my cowardice – because I was simply content to avenge. I didn't want to settle my debts. I didn't want to go for the source, call Voldemort out, earn that moment of glory as my team and I ripped him and his pack of wild dogs to bloody smears on the pavement." He shook his head scornfully. "And at the beginning, it was before the prophecy – there was no fate sealing Voldemort's fate away from me. Between my team, if we had made a full assault..." Cassane's gaze hardened to ice. "We could have killed him. I know we could have.

"But I didn't. I was content slaughtering his men, his informants, his contacts, all of their families, purging every stain of the Dark Mark with Dark magic of my own. I dragged my team into the depths with me... your father, your mother, Sirius... we killed so many." Cassane glanced at Harry. "They feared us as much as they feared the Death Eaters, Harry."

Harry didn't have words for that – what could he possibly say? What could he –

"I don't remember the night when I was attacked," Cassane muttered, running a hand through his thinning hair. "I remember pain and a blue light... I remember a feeling alien to me – it was grief, but on a level that was beyond the human mind's ability to grasp or control, as if I

was feeling the guilt for every possible sin I committed and more... and I remember thrashing around in this ocean of despair, reflected on all sides by a tortured hall of windows reflecting every blood-drenched moment..."

Cassane shook his head. "In the end, it reflected the scope of my life, and rendered it utterly meaningless."

"That was the spell Snape cast," Harry said bracingly, "and... look, you weren't a coward – it doesn't make sense for you all to attempt to kill Voldemort, not without backup or a special weapon or Dumbledore –"

"And yet we didn't seek any of those things," Cassane interrupted harshly. "But I feel you might have missed the point, Harry. In choosing not to face Voldemort, we were not cowards because of the possibility of loss."

Both of Cassane's hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists now. "No, it was because of the possibility we might have won."

Harry froze in mid-step. What the –

"But what I remember most clearly," Cassane continued, his voice very low, "was not the bloody display of those months, but rather the moment of awakening – months after Voldemort had vanished."

This time, the darkness faded from his expression, but the anger remained. "I remember waking up in a private ward – my contributions to St. Mungo's had assured the very best. I remember..." He let out a mirthless laugh. "What I remember most was the curtains."

"The curtains?"

"They were white linen," Cassane said, shaking his head. "Very fine linen too – beautiful, hand-woven cloth, created completely without magic. The light poured through those curtains, and even though the sky was overcast that day, I could see the sun."

"And sitting in a conjured armchair, next to those curtains, was Dumbledore."

Harry closed his eyes, his own imagination drifting as he tried to put an image to what Cassane was saying...

"...Albus?" Cassane whispered, weakly sitting up in bed, his face hollow and wasted from the years of the coma. His muscles hadn't atrophied – the Healers had seen to that – but he was far thinner, and the hospital robes hung on bony arms. "What are you... where –"

"It's been a long time, Nathan," Dumbledore said, his voice calm, but he could tell there was steel in every word. "How are you feeling?"

"What are... how long have I been out?"

"It is early January," Dumbledore replied, glancing back out the window. "1982."

Cassane's mouth fell open with shock. "But... but – I've been out for _"

"Almost two years." Dumbledore rose from his chair, which vanished beneath him as he approached the bed. "You had an extreme nervous breakdown, triggered by a spell that rendered you catatonic. It has only been recently that we've managed to revive you."

Cassane was struggling to sit up, but Dumbledore placed a hand on the young man's shoulder and eased him back down.

"You're still quite weak, you might need –"

"Where's Lily and James?" Cassane asked wildly. "Where's Sirius, where – where is everybody? And what about Voldemort, is he –"

Dumbledore raised a hand, his expression grave.

"Are you sure that you feel up to hearing all of it?"

The colour drained from Cassane's face. "What happened? Are the Potters safe, what did –"

"But even as Dumbledore sat down next to my bed," Cassane said, his voice abruptly dropping and snapping Harry back to the present, "I knew that something had gone horribly wrong. I just didn't know what –"

His voice broke, and he hastily looked away.

"And then he told me everything," he continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "He told me how Voldemort had fallen. He told me how the Death Eaters had been rounded up, some escaping. I remember feeling a bizarre sense of pride as he told me that it had taken five Aurors before Alastor to finally take Antonin down. I remember a feeling of helpless rage as he told me about Sirius' 'betrayal'. I remember a feeling of sheer confusion when I heard that Claudius Kemester had been arrested and jailed as a Death Eater sympathizer.

"And I remember grief," Cassane said, his voice breaking, "when Dumbledore told me that Lily and James were... were gone. And all at once, I remembered that I was alone as well – because Cassandra and Phoebe... they were gone too. All of my life before the coma was effectively wiped away."

Cassane let out a bitter laugh. "And of course, everyone forgot everything I did. There were no charges, no public condemnation, no scathing articles from Rita Skeeter shredding my career like with Crouch. I have to wonder why nothing ever came to light – perhaps it was simply the Ministry sweeping their uglier complicities under the rug, like they did with so many other casualties of that war...

"But one person remembered." Cassane's eyes hardened again. "Dumbledore remembered everything. And even as he told me, reminding me of everything I had lost, everything I had sacrificed, I could see the coolness in his eyes, the disapproving detachment, the disappointment. There was some sympathy, but beneath it was something else. Not that I had gotten what I deserved – not even Dumbledore's that cruel – but rather that I symbolized everything that

disgusted him about the war." He sniffed with disgust. "Maybe he considered me a disappointment – but I don't know, I didn't stay around long enough to care."

This time, the memory leapt straight to Harry's mind – he already knew where Cassane had gone.

Cassane shook his head wistfully as he looked up at the map. "Do you see the little flags on the map?"

"I do."

"Each flag represents a place I have been, and where I have seen something beautiful – magical or not." Cassane looked away from Harry for a second, and Harry felt a lump building in the back of my throat. "Some I can return to see again, others were naught but for an instant. So let me ask you this, Miss Desdame: I have spent my life seeking the last fragments of beauty in this world, whether they are in the distant tombs or the highest mountains, so why would I care about such a case, bereft of light and a belief in good?"

"You went looking for beauty," Harry said numbly, a chill running down his spine.

"To the most distant edges of the earth, I travelled," Cassane murmured, glancing off into the distance. "I climbed mountains, I trudged through jungles, I strode through fields, I walked on glaciers. I stood on the Great Wall of China, at the apex of a Giza pyramid, in the Times Square of New York City, and at the North Pole, the very top of the world." He looked back at Harry. "I went seeking beauty in anything and everything – something I could love, something I could hold onto. Something I could use to forget my loss, forget their faces..."

His fist loosened, and he put a hand to his eyes. "I... I could still see them, Harry. I could see them screaming for me, the memory ringing in my ears everywhere I walked. I tried to get swept away, but the memories were anchors, holding me fast. But yet whenever I returned to my manor and tried to remove the memories from my mind... I found that I couldn't. I needed that pain, that memory, to push away

the growing numbness, the feeling that I was a thing of another time, that I was never to be remembered, that everything I had done meant nothing.

"Now you see my cowardice, Harry." Cassane shook his head. "If we had chosen to make the attempt to kill Voldemort, and had we succeeded... I would have lost it. I would not have had peace – I would have killed just a facsimile of my grief and guilt. There would have been no closure. I would have been forced to reconcile a horrible thing."

"What?" Harry's voice was barely above a whisper.

"That there was nothing I could have done to save them," Cassane whispered, and Harry felt a pang in his gut as he saw a slow tear trickle down the older man's face. "That no matter what I had done, no matter who I had fought, there was nothing I could have done to save my wife and daughter. That I would have had to reconcile the fact that their lives were stolen from me not by some failing of mine, but by the sheer capriciousness of Fate and Death. That I was not responsible.

"But I refused to acknowledge it. And when I woke and the war was over, and that I had not only lost more, but that I had lost my chance at vengeance..." Cassane closed his eyes. "I resented you, Harry. I hated the Boy-Who-Lived. For you had stolen that chance from me."

Harry felt a tremor of unease. "Nathan, what could you have –"

"I could have been better!" Cassane snarled, his face suddenly twisting with rage as he rounded on Harry. "I could have smarter, stronger, more informed, more prepared, more powerful! With all of the power that I had, with everything that I had learned and accomplished – no, I don't fucking believe that there was nothing I could do! I don't believe in 'fate' or 'destiny'! I don't believe in 'prophecy' – these are concepts invented by men, Harry Potter! Men who do not have the courage to admit they have failed, admit that their lives are more than just cosmic playthings for some omniscient god! Saying that I could not have found a way..."

His voice trailed off as he looked away, fighting to regain his composure.

"No," he whispered, "I couldn't accept – I can't accept – that I was helpless, that I could have only done nothing. Perhaps that is the root of my cowardice – refusing to accept what many would see as such a simple fact to take the worry from my mind. Man is not a helpless pawn, Harry – we never have been, and we never shall be. And things that happen seemingly beyond control – no, a loss of control is a bad excuse for failure. We live in a world of spells, time travel, and magic beyond our wildest dreams. You've seen it, Harry – with all of these possibilities, how could I simply accept that they were gone?

"But I think some weaker part of my mind thought that if I could just forget," Cassane said, his voice suddenly trembling, "if I could just put their faces out of my mind... that life would go on, as it had before... that I could be the man I once was, that I could regain my honour, my life, my soul...

"And then I found it."

Harry took a deep breath and tried to shove back his frayed nerves – it had gotten more than a little unnerving. "Found... found what, exactly?"

"It had been a rumour," Cassane said, his tone beginning to quicken. "Something I had found in an old tomb across the world – a legend that there... that there was a way that I... I could see them again. That I could eradicate my mistakes, that I could have it all back again, that I could start over!

"So I did my research, and I tracked it all back here – to London." Cassane tapped his foot on the floor. "More specifically, this very Department. So I began digging, and before my efforts stalled against the Ministry's bureaucracy, I discovered it."

"It'?" Harry asked with confusion. "What? What is it?"

"A project the Department of Mysteries had pursued since its inception," Cassane whispered, his eyes burning with a sudden

manic energy. "A project the Ministry had poured untold amounts of gold into researching, a project with untold potential – a project that had been kept very, very quiet for a long time."

"How did you find out about it?" Harry asked curiously. "I mean, if it was so secret –"

"I looked in the right places," Cassane replied softly. "And as good as the Ministry is... well, they can't hide everything. Ah, here we are."

Harry looked up, and saw a black door set against the wall. "Is that where –"

"I want to show you, Harry," Cassane said urgently. "I want you to see."

The door opened with a prod of Cassane's wand, and Harry couldn't help but open his mouth with wonder as they stepped into a beautiful rectangular room. There were clocks of every description on the walls, and a beautiful sparkling bell jar with a flower growing inside to maturity before withering.

But everything in the room wasn't perfect. In the far corner there was a stack of hourglasses that Harry immediately recognized as Time-Turners – but every single hourglass was cracked, the sand pooling on the floor.

"Your magic really did a number here," Cassane said briskly, quickly crossing the room and opening the next door. "Come on, Harry, not much further."

They stepped into a circular chamber, and the second Cassane closed the door, he tapped it twice with his wand. Immediately a series of blue-white runes sprayed over the door, gleaming brilliantly in the dim candlelight.

"What was that –"

"Shh," Cassane whispered, taking a hold of Harry's arm, "and watch." And before Harry's unbelieving eyes, the walls and doors around him began to spin!

A few minutes later, the spinning stopped, but the brilliant runes remained on the door. Cassane nodded with satisfaction, and then approached the second door from their entrance.

"Come in, Harry – I want you to see this."

The air in the new room was still, and very cold. It was large, and looked a bit like one of the Ministry courtrooms, but that was where the similarities ended. There had once been what looked like benches lining the room, but they had been ripped out and replaced with strange clockwork mechanisms that whirred and sparked. A few even looked like modern Muggle technology, with screens that displayed hazy, flickering images and streams of symbols and numbers.

And in the center of the room was a sunken pit of grey-black stone, about twenty feet deep. Steep, crumbling steps, criss-crossed with copper wires and glowing blue streams that Harry guessed were some form of a magical conduit, rose out of the pit to a dais, and Harry immediately thought of the last dais he had seen in the sphere.

But this dais was very different. On it was an archway of unhewn stone, and between the arch was a faded, tattered veil, fluttering slightly as if a chill wind was blowing past it. But despite the lack of carving, the archway still was covered in artifice. Whirring gears, spooling wires, and sparking mechanisms crawled up the stone like veins on an arm, climbing to the very top, where a massive orb of glass hung suspended over the arch. The orb, supported by chains and metal grips, glowed brightly with a sickly grey light, and Harry felt a peculiar feeling of foreboding as his gaze drifted downwards.

For jammed into the base of the dais, hard enough to split the rock in two, was another Ectoplasmic Projector.

Harry closed his eyes, trying to make sense of it all. It didn't help that he could swear that he was hearing voices whispering. And it doesn't sound like Fleur –

"Do you hear that?"

"Them, Harry," Cassane corrected gently, proceeding down the steps towards the pit, effortlessly stepping over the wires and magical connections. "And if all of this wasn't here, you'd still hear them beyond that brink."

"It's coming from beyond the veil –"

"Not just from there," Cassane said, pointing upwards. "The orb as well. If you look a little closer, you can see them all."

Harry stepped a bit closer and squinted up at the orb – and nearly stepped back as he saw a ghostly face slam itself against the crystal, its mouth open and screaming with unbridled rage –

"They are the spectres of Hogwarts, Harry," Cassane said in a low voice. "Trapped and tormented, bound by the enchantments the Founders locked over Hogwarts like a vice for a thousand years. Prevented from going on because a fear that they might decide their business was unfinished. They have suffered a millennium, Harry – and thanks to you, I finally have what I need to set them free."

The old wizard glanced down from the orb and fixed Harry with a wistful glance. "And perhaps – just perhaps – I can regain everything I've lost. This barrier, Harry... the Ministry's been studying it for years. Anything that goes through never returns – but until now, nobody has ever succeeded in bringing anything back."

Harry paused. "What do you mean, bring anything back?" His mind suddenly jumped to a thought – a horrible, yet strangely compelling thought. He can't possibly mean – but if he does – "You don't mean –"

"Yes, Harry," Cassane said softly.

Harry's mouth fell open again. It's not possible.

"A soul, Harry, has energy beyond either of our wildest dreams – and there are thousands of souls in that orb," Cassane exclaimed, jumping down from the dais and approaching Harry. "Thousands! With that much energy, that much power, the veil can be sundered in two, letting out a long psychic call across the mists of eternity." His eyes softened. "And I... I know who I'm calling. Can't you imagine, Harry – the chance to bring any of them back –"

He could imagine. His father and mother's faces swam into his vision, and he felt the rush of longing surge through him – the chance to have a normal family, a desperate hope for something that he had only dared to dream when staring into the Mirror of Erised...

And then it happened.

It wasn't quite doubt, but the thought of the Mirror brought something to mind that raised the question to his lips before any other.

"How did you do it?"

Cassane seemed to be expecting the question, and closed his eyes. "The Ministry's been working on this research for years –"

"But all of this?" Harry exclaimed, raising his hands and gesturing wildly at the fantastic devices around him. "This... you couldn't have done all of this in a few months without help, not with everything else going on!"

"Very true," Cassane conceded, his voice slowing, weighing every word, "but then again, you saw some of the machinery in my home when you visited me the first time in that body, inquiring about vampires."

"Well, take a seat, Harry," Cassane said, nudging aside a few books with his foot into a corner of the room. "Mind the oscilloscopes and radiance coils on the chairs over there – they tend to spark more than they should, and I haven't had a chance to fully adjust them."

"Right," Harry said nervously, stepping away from the strange equipment and taking a seat in one of the few open chairs in the room. It creaked comfortably under his weight, but Harry didn't notice. He was watching Cassane, who had drawn his wand and was sending a score of brass mechanisms whizzing into the air to rotate around the room.

"I apologize for the mess," Cassane replied with a hint of a shrug, taking a seat in a massive leather armchair next to the fireplace. "I haven't had much of an opportunity to clean since I got back from my last trip. I only returned for the vote, as a matter of fact. I haven't even had time to get those installed properly." He pointed at the electrical equipment, which sparked threateningly at him, the screens flickering to life for a brief second before shutting off.

"I thought Muggle electronics don't work where there's a lot of magic," Harry said slowly.

"And so they don't – not usually, anyways," Cassane finished with a grin as he waved his wand again. A few glasses zoomed out of a small concealed cupboard, along with a rather dusty bottle. "But, from time to time, wizards try to make them work. From everything I've heard, Arthur Weasley is notorious for it. The funny thing is, a group of American wizards down in Texas have made remarkable progress." He laughed once, the deep sound filling the room. "A pity the rest of their fragmented wizarding society will never be able to utilize it."

The uneasy feeling in Harry's gut only grew stronger. "But that doesn't... why would you have them, you couldn't have known about the attacks yet – you couldn't have known that you'd be able to power this thing..."

The chain of logic in his mind reached its conclusion – a conclusion he couldn't quite even believe. It's not possible... it's just not bloody possible...

Cassane stepped closer, and slowly placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I... while I knew you didn't know everything, I thought I had given enough of the pieces away. Even the night before you

consummated your relationship with Tonks, I thought I had given you the hint..."

"You have something special with Miss Tonks there, I think," Cassane continued, his eyes strangely moistening. "Reminds me a bit... a bit of what I used to have with my wife, a long time ago."

Harry felt a bit of a lump forming in the back of his throat. "I'm sorry, Nathan – I really am."

"You know... once you lose someone like that... she's gone, forever, and you'll never replace her." Cassane took a great, shuddering breath as he continued, a strange note in his voice. "Harry, I'd do anything to bring her and my daughter back – my family. That kind of beauty... you can spend your whole life searching and never find it again. No matter what you do..."

He shook his head, and turned back to Harry. "You should go. Be careful, and keep in mind that what you're doing... well, you're making it clear who you can't afford to lose."

"I think Tonks know that," Harry said quietly, "and she's accepted it."

The smile returned to Cassane's face. "Yes, I know. Go ahead, then – you've earned this."

Harry nodded quickly and left the room, the back of his mind pondering the strange note in Cassane's voice – like he was trying to send a message to Harry, a cry for help...

"Part of me that night wanted to say everything," Cassane whispered, his voice breaking. "I wanted to scream it, shake you, tell you what I had done and give you the chance to stop everything before it was far too late... but every other part of my mind told me to stop. I couldn't compromise any more, I couldn't throw it all away, everything I had fought for and sacrificed – I couldn't do it, Harry, I couldn't."

"This isn't happening," Harry said, not knowing whether to go for his wand or run for his life. "This... this can't be happening –"

"Do you want to know why Voldemort chose not to attack anyone the first month he had returned?" Cassane asked softly. "He made two plans, Harry. The first was to retrieve the prophecy connecting the two of you."

He let go of Harry's shoulder and turned away. "And the second was to approach me."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. No, this isn't happening – not this way –

"He came to the manor in the middle of the night, alone," Cassane said, beginning to walk back towards the archway. "He knocked on the door, and asked to be let inside. I went for my wand, and I nearly threw the Killing Curse, but he said he was not here to fight, but to make a bargain."

"No..."

"I could have killed him," Cassane continued, his hand sliding across the stone of the dais, "but his words slithered into my ears. He said he knew my pain, and even though I knew the words were a lie, I kept listening. He said he wanted to make amends, give me... reparations."

Harry's hand dropped towards his wand in his pocket.

"I told him there was nothing he could do to counter the lives he took, but he offered me a bargain. He said there was a way – a chance to bring them back – but he would need the spectres of Hogwarts, the damned ghosts, and he knew how to get them out. He would have agents at Hogwarts that would act, and when Dumbledore's forces rose to stop them, I would allow myself to be coerced into service, giving them all the tools they'd need to funnel the spirits here..."

"And at that second, I knew he had an ulterior motive." Cassane's face twisted into a disgusted smile. "No, I knew Voldemort had a plan for these spirits, some corrupt ritual that would probably wreak havoc upon our world, but I knew I could be faster – I could earn my

revenge against him, double-cross him... but I would have to play along."

Harry felt the holly wood of the wand beneath his fingers – he wasn't sure what he should do, but he needed to do something –

"And every part of my mind, my conscience, my moral fibre screamed for me to turn away," Cassane said quietly, his hand rising to his temple. "But Voldemort had offered me something I could not resist – a chance, a desperate hope, the slim plea that fills every prayer – the possibility that my mistakes could be amended. That I could bring them back."

I can't take him by myself, Harry thought, his mind racing. He's way too good – and he doesn't believe in prophecy, so he might just kill me if I try something –

"And so I asked Voldemort how he could accomplish such a feat, and he told me about an archway in the Department of Mysteries that he had learned about from his pet Unspeakable years earlier –"

Rookwood, Harry thought with a horrible pang. What else did the Death Eater tell him about this place?

"–So I would need to get down here," Cassane said, running his hand across the jagged rock of the dais. "In a later meeting, he told me that when he broke in to steal the prophecy, he discovered the man running this research – a man named Laertes Rawling."

It is hard not to think that my life has meant nothing.

I stand alone in a shrinking circle of flames, and I wonder what I could have done to make something of my life. Had I solved the tangled web of mysteries, would my accomplishments have meant anything?

Or will it be forgotten, like the rest of them?

Will my death be ignored? Will I end up in the silent, unmarked graves, of the Hit Wizards and Aurors who gave their lives in the last

war to earn whatever paltry scraps of freedom we've clung to? Graves that go unvisited – alone in the darkness of the night.

Or will I even have a grave? Will I be like Leon Sanders, his grave the shattered scattering of rock where Azkaban once pieced the darkened, cloudy skies? Will anyone care that Dmitri Kemester, son of Claudius Kemester, has passed beyond this world?

Is it pertinent that I wonder about my grave, how I shall be remembered, or is it merely fantasy? Does legacy matter beyond a few trite statements and liquor poured out on a pavement stone?

Or am I to die forgotten, like the mysteries left unsolved, the truths left untold, the questions left unanswered?

"He told me Rawling had sympathies with Dumbledore," Cassane continued softly, "but that he would take care of the removal. After all, he had a sleeper agent within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement named Reed Larshall..."

"Kemester's partner," Harry said aloud, his voice echoing in the dim chamber.

"Yes," Cassane replied, glancing back at Harry. "Although Kemester's actions never really drew me in – I didn't even recognize him under the scars at the Department of Magical Finance – if you hadn't mauled him so efficiently, he would have looked just like his father –"

Harry struggled to think – it still didn't make sense! How the hell could Cassane...

"Wait," he asked, his mind jumping to the first thing he could string together. "That first time we met – Voldemort attacked you, I was there!"

"And yet he dealt no damage to my manor and took nothing," Cassane replied simply. "You and I, we both managed to escape easily – after all, Voldemort needed you alive to stop the spirits at Hogwarts, but they had to make it look convincing."

"Voldemort wanted... he wanted me to trust you!" Harry accused, his hand gripping on his wand, but he didn't draw it quite yet. "That's what he wanted –"

"No, that was me," Cassane interrupted, and Harry was a little shocked by the genuine hurt in the man's eyes. "I saw so much of your father – no, not even that, I saw so much of myself. I knew the whole time what Voldemort was doing, what he was planning to do... and even though I knew that he would try to hurt you the same way he attacked me, there was a chance that you were stronger, that you wouldn't make the same mistakes..."

Harry racked his brain – pieces were still out of order, things still didn't quite make sense –

"The Ministry attacks," he blurted.

"Both a distraction for my work, and a way to hurt the Ministry," Cassane replied. His eyes narrowed. "And of all of my crimes, that is not one I regret."

"People died –"

"Not nearly as many as there could have been," Cassane retorted coolly. "The attack was very early in the morning – most Ministry employees weren't inside."

"But you were still working for him!" Harry shouted, his wand snapping up to point at the older wizard. "You still –"

"Put the wand away, Harry, you don't stand a chance," Cassane interrupted sternly. "And the appropriate phrase is 'with' him, not 'for' him. For him, I only completed a few tasks, and gave him only one thing. I did not lie when I said my desire was neutrality. I did not want to get involved – unfortunately, the letter from Miss Granger forced my hand."

"Tonks said you were worried about the Ministry finding out," Harry growled, "but you were really talking about Voldemort –"

Cassane laughed openly at that comment, and his voice boomed across the hall. "By that point, Harry, Voldemort already knew that I was working at cross-purposes to him, but he didn't dare strike back directly. Why do you think that only that insufferable woman Skeeter was attacked when I published that article in the Prophet calling attention to the activity of the Death Eaters? Why do you think he never returned to deal with me personally as I continually aided you far and beyond anything I had promised? And who do think sent a Patronus and immediately tipped off the goblins when Lucius Malfoy attempted to rob you?"

Harry's mouth fell open. "And... you would have already known from Fleur –"

"I told you then that there was nothing more I dared do," Cassane replied, folding his arms over his chest. "And I did not lie. And besides, compared to what you did – ah, you were far more disruptive to Voldemort's plans than I was. You managed to limit casualties at Hogwarts from the spiritual attacks, where he had planned for a much higher body count. You managed to make plans and stratagems that caught him off-guard. In fact, your biggest accomplishment may have been entirely accidental."

"The temporal distortion around Hogwarts," Harry whispered.

"It was something he had never suspected, and had nothing to prepare against it." Cassane gave Harry a strangely wistful smile. "And I thank you for that, Harry – it made my... acts hold less emphasis and less weight, if that makes any sense at all."

Harry's mind whirled. The pieces were falling into place, everything Cassane said was making too much sense, but Harry felt that something was still amiss – Cassane was holding something back –

"It's not simple," Cassane said calmly, taking a deep breath as he looked up at the glowing orb above the archway. "There is no simplicity in this... particularly now."

"You're not telling me something," Harry said in a low voice, his grip on his wand tighter than ever. "I can feel it, you're holding something back."

Cassane closed his eyes. "Harry, do you remember when you came to my house in your simulacrum the second time, and you... and you encountered the Muggle police?"

"You said it wasn't relevant," Harry said, his mind racing as he tried to remember. "You wouldn't tell me what they were investigating –"

"I honestly thought you knew." Cassane made eye contact with Harry. "Especially considering you recognized one of the officers."

"Yeah, Seamus Finnigan's dad," Harry said impatiently. "What does that –"

And then a new memory came roaring back, of a conversation he had hardly remembered, one of the few times he had spoken to his fellow Gryffindors in months...

"It's not just that," Dean said heavily. "Look, Seamus had a rough summer. His dad read one of the articles about Harry escaping from that plane – well, he's a police officer, and that article put him between a rock and a hard place."

"Why?"

"Well, there was a bloodstain on the wing of that plane, and nobody could identify it..."

Harry's eyes opened very wide.

From the very beginning.

From the very start, he was there...

"T-That... that was –"

"My plane, yes," Cassane replied softly. "The one task Voldemort required of me – he knew from the Malfoys of your friendship with the Weasleys, and he was able to predict your flight path with relative ease, and he suspected that given your skill on a broom, which he had heard from Crouch Jr. – it was only a matter of timing..."

Harry staggered back. From the very beginning – from the very fucking beginning... "I... I –"

"I'm sorry, Harry –"

"SORRY'S NOT FUCKING GOOD ENOUGH!" Harry screamed, his wand snapping up again. "Do you realize what you did? Did you –"

"Do you think I wanted to do this, Harry?" Cassane retorted, and Harry noticed the other wizard's wand slide into his fingers. "Do you honestly think I wanted to do this to you, the son of two of my closest friends – I nearly told you so many times, I wanted to scream it that I was responsible, that I was the one..."

He sighed. "But I had made my devil's deal – and I wasn't going to throw away that hope. And you still managed to get through it all, Harry." He blinked and looked back at Harry. "You survived the flame, and came out stronger than ever. It wasn't my plan – no, I hated whatever plan I had every step of the way... but you came through... and now we're here."

"It's not supposed to be like this," Harry said, his voice numb as he fought against his emotions surging in his gut. "You're... you're not supposed to –"

Cassane raised his wand, and there was a flurry of white sparks. Out of the darkness, supported by silvery chains, two massive stone biers dropped down, locking into two spaces where the wires and conduits had been diverted away.

Harry's breath caught in his throat. On one of the biers was the simulacrum of Clarissa Desdame, nude and covered tastefully with a white sheet.

And on the other bier, unmoving under a similar sheet, was Hermione.

He tasted bile in his throat as he stepped closer. She looked so still, so peaceful, so –

"Is she –"

"No," Cassane replied simply, not looking at Harry. "She is not dead, merely under the influence of a powerful Draught of Living Death. I told you I would be able to find her."

"But what are you –"

"When they return, they'll need bodies, Harry," Cassane replied, still not meeting Harry's eyes. "I made several contingency plans – in fact, Miss Delacour's original recruitment called for such a fate... but this way was easier."

"But Hermione –"

"She asked for oblivion, Harry, and I... I can understand a desire for such a request." Cassane closed his eyes, and Harry could see his hand trembling. "Her mind was reeling, she didn't understand how her friend could do something like this to her – something so violent, something so horrific. And even when I told her that it wasn't you, she told me... she told me she saw something of you in the eyes while it –"

The older man's voice broke, and he finally looked at Harry. "Harry... I, I told her what I planned to do, and she said... she said all she wanted was oblivion, and if there was someone who could..." He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "All I plan to do is grant her request. There will be no more pain – she will be in a better place, I promise you."

Harry didn't know what to say – what could he say?

...while the abomination may have been driven back, the true crime has not yet been solved...

Su had figured it out, Harry thought numbly. She had access to my memories while she was in my body, I would bet... and that means she just put together the pieces I overlooked...

Now almost everything fit together...

"The one thing you gave Voldemort," he whispered. "What was it?"

"Just a book," Cassane replied, glancing up at the archway. "The Book of Inversion and Duplex."

There were only two copies of 'The Book of Inversion and Duplex.

And now Harry saw the final piece. Harry had one copy of the book.

And Voldemort and Cassane had shared the other.

He glanced around the chamber. The only sounds in the air were the sparking of mechanisms and the whispers from the veil, but to Harry, it felt like silence.

"So what now?" His voice sounded too calm, almost alien to his ears. "You... you said we were going to discuss my future."

"And a fairly simple discussion it is, Harry," Cassane replied, lowering his wand and glancing back towards Harry as he began to climb the narrow dais steps. "You now know everything I could tell you. I can't say it's everything you need to know, but it's all I know for certain. And now you have a choice."

Harry felt his breathing come faster as he raised his wand. "The obvious choice –"

"–Is to try and kill me," Cassane finished, scratching his temple idly as he reached the top of the dais. "And as good as you are, you aren't capable of such a feat, Harry. That's not anything against your skill, let me make that clear." The older wizard gave him a knowing expression. "It's just fact."

"You make it sound like I have another option." Harry tried to keep the emotion out of his voice and out of his mind, even though his sheer anger was making a concerted effort to assert control. "Like I should just let you kill one of my best friends, or take my simulacrum."

Cassane looked away. "Harry, as much as you may wish to, you cannot stop me from completing things. I know that Voldemort is on his way, and I have destroyed too much to be stopped now. But I do have another option."

"I'm listening."

"Come with me."

Harry's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"Come with me," Cassane repeated. "You're tired of this life, you're tired of all of this, and you know that as long as you stay here, you will never be free of it! As soon as this is completed, I will take my wife and daughter and we will leave this island forever, put this horrid mess of a half-spent life behind me – and I want you to come with me." And to Harry's shock, he could hear quiet desperation in Cassane's voice now. "You don't need this, you don't need any of them. You can take Tonks and Sirius and leave all this behind, live a brand-new life!"

"But it will all be based on a lie!" Harry exclaimed. "Your wife – your daughter, they will know they –"

"Their bodies will transform upon possession," Cassane replied urgently. "And they – they won't have to remember any of it! We can start over, Harry – anywhere we dream, we can go! We can forget this war, this hell, this miserable existence where everything we do to save the world destroys us in turn!" Cassane's voice shook. "There's purity in simplicity, Harry, and purity in peace. I don't need this – and I see so much of myself in you to know that you don't need this either. Please, Harry."

"But the prophecy –"

"Prophecy be damned!" Cassane roared, and red sparks sprayed from his wand. "Did the prophecy say that it was only you with the 'power to defeat the Dark Lord'? Learn the lesson that Voldemort already learned – prophecy only has weight because we give it weight! Your life is worth more than prophecy, particularly considering what following said prophecy will do to you!"

The wizard's words rang in the room, ringing in the silence – the long, long silence.

"I... I ..." Harry put his hand to his forehead with frustration. He shouldn't even be considering this offer – what if it was all a trap –

It's not.

But what if Cassane was lying –

He's not.

But how could he trust him –

You can't, the little voice in his mind whispered, but despite all of his crimes... maybe he should be allowed to go free...

"I... I can't leave my friends," he finally said, shaking his head. "If I leave them to suffer under Voldemort –"

"Dumbledore is the only one he ever feared," Cassane cut him off, his voice very cold. "I think it's about time the Headmaster used some of that fear to his advantage."

"But Dumbledore's counting on –"

"Dumbledore," Cassane snarled, his eyes suddenly blazing with a dangerous light, "has done nothing to earn your respect. He is not some omniscient force of good, he is not some 'paragon of light' – he is a man, Harry. Just a man, who has spent his life exploiting you and forging you into a weapon to be cast aside once the war is done."

"He hasn't –"

"You're expendable to him, Harry," Cassane spat. "He's lied to you just like he lied to me. Do you honestly think he cares?"

"I do."

The new voice caught them both off-guard, and Harry's heart leapt in his chest as he spun around.

And there they were at the door. Tonks, McGonagall, Moody – and Dumbledore.

"I do care," Dumbledore said simply, drawing his wand with one easy move as he began to descend down the stairs towards the pit. "I have always cared. It hurts me just as much as it hurts you, Nathan – and it always has."

"How did you –"

"You left Broderick Bode alive, Nathan," Dumbledore said, shaking his head with disappointment. "Even despite the grievous wounds Miss Delacour inflicted upon him, he did manage to get a message off. Such carelessness – it was almost as if you wanted me to come here and stop you –"

From the anguished look on Cassane's face, Harry knew there was at least some truth in that statement.

"I understand, Nathan," Dumbledore said, his voice both strong and compassionate as he moved closer. "I understand, but this is the wrong way – you have to let go. I already told you once, they would have gone on –"

"YOU DON'T KNOW THAT!" Cassane screamed, his eyes bulging as he pointed his wand wildly at Dumbledore. "You don't know – no, I have to try, I have to –"

"Nathan, this isn't the right way!" Tonks exclaimed, shoving past Dumbledore and moving next to Harry. "I saw everything, I know how you feel –"

"Liars."

I can see my brother now.

It's sudden, but the fire around me seems less terrifying. The dragons and serpents fade away, and all I see a candle flame. I see his cherry-red hair waving in the wind, his smile never fading as he steps close.

"Will it hurt?"

Bartholomew shrugs. "Maybe. For me it was quick. A blink and it was over." He glances away, up at the dark sky above them. "But I went out flying, Dmitri... it's definitely the way to go."

"I did so much," I whisper. "I hurt so many people because..."

Bartholomew looks back at me. "We can't know all ends, Dmitri."

"I betrayed everything." My voice is hoarse and cracking badly. "I... I took everything our father believed and set it on fire –"

"If you did, I would not be here."

My mouth falls open as my father steps out of the flames, his expression stern and cold, as it always is.

"I taught you and Bartholomew to live by a code," Claudius says, his voice abrupt and curt. "A code that means more than some codicil of law. For laws can be changed – I know that, I lived through it – but as long as we don't compromise our principles, our code is sacrosanct."

"But I did." My composure is crumbling now, but I don't care. "I comprised – I went outside the law, I did everything I had to get answers. For fuck's sake, I tortured people! I – I failed –"

"You did."

Not him. No, please, not him.

"Reed..."

"You were the worst partner I ever had," Reed said, shaking his closely-shaved head with disbelief. "And yet I stood in Scrimgeour's office and pleaded for him to authorize a mission to save your life. Even when I was being controlled and manipulated, even when it would have been so damn easy to put my wand to the back of your neck and just say two simple words and vastly simplify my life, I never did. Do you know why?"

"No..."

"Because deep down, you believed in something. I don't know if it was your own crazy brand of justice or what, but do you know what it means when you can look into somebody's eyes and know they're holding onto something, and that they will go through hellfire and brimstone to get there." Reed sets a hand on my shoulder. "So tell me, Dmitri – what did you believe in?"

"Having belief isn't redemption," Claudius says coolly.

"Quiet, Father," Bartholomew mutters.

I don't know what to say. Do I believe in justice, however one chooses to define such a nebulous and empty concept? Or is it something simpler, something much more basic...

"I believe..." I cough, and my eyes start to water. "I... I believe that... that life is fair. Everything gets its due, good or bad. And... and that's why I was so angry when you died, Bartholomew – hell, when any of you died! It wasn't fair, it wasn't right –"

"Life's not fair."

"Then maybe I'm the only one who cares!" I scream, my voice echoing "Maybe I'm naïve and stupid and maybe I'm just wrong, but it's all I have! So maybe life's not fair – well, maybe I'm here to make it fair! Maybe if more people were like me, I wouldn't be here... like this."

"Dmitri, if more people were like you," Reed says in a low voice, "nothing would change. The world wouldn't change. People don't change."

"Fine." My voice is growing hoarse, and my scars burn from the dampness trickling down my face. "I don't care, then. Maybe... maybe I'm just alone. And if you're all so dead-set in convincing me of that, then leave me here to die in peace!"

There is a long silence, and then I feel his hand on my shoulder.

"We're not leaving you."

I look up and I meet Reed's eyes. "Does... does it hurt?"

"At first, yeah," Reed says sadly, "but it gets better."

"Nobody will come to my funeral," I whisper. "It's so trite but... nobody will care."

"Even when we were partners," Reed replies softly, "you always stood alone. You are not a coward, Dmitri, and that world means nothing now."

"I'm not sorry for what I've done."

The words are a little unexpected, even to me. I know one is supposed to be contrite at the moment of their death, but that's not who I am.

"You wouldn't be a Kemester otherwise," my father says calmly. "Are you ready?"

I taste cold, clean air for the last time, and glance up at the moonless sky.

"Yes."

The spell collapses, and the pain comes immediately, but it will be over soon.

My name is Dmitri Kemester. I am far, far less than a hero – but I am a Hit Wizard, and I am a man, and I face my Death with dignity, poise, and without fear.

And in the end, that's all that matters.

Moody and McGonagall snapped their wands up at the cloaked figures stepping out of the darkness of the chamber. There were six, eight... no, more than a dozen. Harry felt a chill rush down his spine as he grabbed Tonks' hand.

"They're lying to you, Nathan," the lead cloaked figure said, his voice high and cold as he slid his hood back to reveal a hairless scalp. "They've always lied to you –"

"You'd listen to Lord Voldemort before you listen to me, Nathan?" Dumbledore asked sadly. He turned as Voldemort moved closer. "The depths to which you plunge sometimes still astound me, Tom –"

"They shouldn't," Cassane whispered.

"And now it is time, Nathan," Voldemort continued, as if he hadn't even heard Dumbledore, his eyes glittering with raw avarice, "that we conclude our little bargain."

"I agree that the bargain has used up its usefulness to me," Cassane said, his voice abruptly calm as he looked down. "In fact, it has long been rather... irrelevant to me."

"A shame there is not much you can reasonably do to stop me," Voldemort said pleasantly, "for even with Albus Dumbledore standing with you, I have brought more than enough Death Eaters to take what is mine."

Harry looked wildly between Voldemort, Dumbledore, and Cassane – but there was a smile growing on Cassane's face. A smile of confidence – a smile of triumph.

What the hell...

"No... you see, I planned that you'd try something like this, Voldemort," Cassane said loudly, rapping his knuckles on the archway, knocking a few fragments away. "I knew you'd try something, and while I didn't expect the cavalry, you're too late."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up, and Harry couldn't help but feel his own heart pounding wildly. What the –

"You see, I activated everything in here the moment the spectres reached this place," Cassane said, his eyes blazing, "and that means, given how long everything takes to warm up... it should start right about... now."

At Cassane's word, every mechanism let off a shower of sparks, every screen exploded, peppering the ground with hot glass, and Harry felt his feet leave the floor.

"Stop him!" he could hear Voldemort screaming as the Death Eaters let out stifled yells, their own feet leaving the ground as everything in the room began to hover. "Kill him now –"

But Cassane was laughing and shouting over them, his wand shooting jets of hot white light at whoever flew close – but then his eyes latched on to one figure drifting away from the rest.

"Antonin!"

Harry twisted, but the Death Eater was already raising his wand –

"I can bring her back for you, Antonin!" Cassane shouted. "All we need is a body – you can kill Bellatrix, it would be easy –"

Lightning cracked through the air, but Harry could hear Bellatrix howl a curse and Dolohov narrowly dodged a reddish curse as they flew higher and higher –

Somehow, Cassane did it, he's doing it –

And then he heard a voice.

A voice he didn't expect to hear. A voice that sent a horrifying chill down his spine. A voice that was malevolent, and just as triumphant as Cassane...

He felt Tonks' hand squeeze hard against his as Cassane looked up wildly to see the source of that voice...

And there he was, translucent and grinning, staring straight at Cassane, a massive black boulder clutched between his hands.

A shard of that sphere, Harry realized with a rush of horror. But what's he doing –

"Tell me, Nathan," Peeves hissed, his voice audible above the hissing of the sparks, "have you ever seen a dream die?"

"What are you –"

"I suppose not," Peeves replied, shaking his head. "Guess today is your lucky day."

The poltergeist hefted the boulder.

"Of course, you might want to pick up a mirror."

The boulder arced through the air. Spells ricocheted off of it, and pieces fell away – but it didn't break.

Peeves kept his gaze locked on Cassane, his evil smile only growing wider.

The boulder struck the orb holding the ghosts.

Both shattered.

And everything went mad.

There was a squeal of agonized wires and machinery. Sparks exploded everywhere as translucent spectres flooded free, screaming at the top of their lungs...

Then Harry saw a flutter of movement –

And Voldemort was suddenly standing in front of him, his eyes blazing with cold satisfaction, his wand pointed right at Harry.

"No matter. Tonight, I still win. AVADA KEDAVRA!"

There was a flash of green, and he could hear Tonks' scream and a rush of searing cold...

And everything went black.

Author's Note: well, here's the last chapter. Warnings for violence and all that, but there is something of a resolution here, and the answers to the majority of the questions left unanswered. The epilogue will be coming out in the next few days, but until then, read, review, and enjoy!

-Silens

The world was glass.

All around him, he could see it sparkling, shards of every shape and size. Some were jagged, and scored fine lines of blood across his skin. Some were blunt and just tumbled away, vanishing into invisible particles upon contact with any hard surface.

All he saw when he looked up was broken glass. Some was suspended by sputtering, failing magic, and some was drifting down in a gleaming cloud, sizzling with the residue of the souls it had contained.

The orb was broken. The spirits were gone, and even as he heard the murmurs behind the veil grow in volume, he knew there would be no cry to split whatever was on the other side. Nothing but the tinkling of broken glass.

He heard screams – Tonks', he realized faintly – and out of the corner of his eye, he saw a brilliant flash of green.

Someone is dead.

One more soul gone. Beyond the pale, beyond any reach of any magic he could cast –

In the back of his mind, something had broken. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but he vaguely knew that there should be a part of his mind that was screaming with rage, at a magnificent plan falling and shattering upon the stone.

But there was no rage. Not from him. It was as if he had just finished playing a long game of chess, every move fraught with peril... and

now the opponent had moved a single piece and had placed him in checkmate.

But even that was an inexact metaphor, because the poltergeist wasn't the enemy... Voldemort's plans had been foiled too...

I ran across Bifrost, a bridge of ice and rainbows... and before I could reach Asgard, the trickster broke the bridge, already weakened by the heat of my footsteps...

I fall through glass and rainbows, but where will I land?

The first thing Harry saw was darkness – but it wasn't completely dark. There was a light behind him – a dingy, sputtering light bulb, casting a grimy light, barely cleaving the darkness.

He staggered to his feet, the back of his mind relieved that gravity was once again restored, but he had the feeling that something was wrong. Voldemort used the Killing Curse... so where the hell am I now? Did my simulamancy somehow save me... but even still, I never left my other simulacrum in a place like this...

He eyed as much of the room as he could see. Most was obscured in darkness, but there was a mirrored window stretching along both side walls, casting faint reflections of the dingy light. The light-bulb was suspended right over the back wall, where a door had been welded shut with great force and hastily painted over. Whatever colour on the walls and ceilings was dirty beige, the type seen in old, decrepit hospitals...

Harry's hand slid to his pocket for his wand – only to find it gone.

"Son of a bitch," he swore, hastily searching through his pockets.
"Damn it, where the –"

"Where, I think, isn't exactly the right question."

Without warning, another light clicked on, illuminating the entire room. Harry saw a steel table, nailed firmly to the floor, two cheap metal chairs – and one was occupied.

Rage flooded through Harry. "Peeves."

The poltergeist looked more solid than it ever had before. He was still translucent, and white as a sheet, but there was a distinct sense that he was more affected by the laws of physics than any other time Harry had seen him.

Peeves' eyes lit up. "Ah, Harry, great to see you! Why don't you take a seat?"

"What are you doing here?" Harry spat, not moving from his spot. "What the hell is this –"

"That requires an explanation," Peeves replied, a cruelly wide grin spreading across his face. "And I'd prefer you sit down so we can... tidy things up, as it is."

"And this point, I really don't have to listen to you," Harry replied dangerously, stepping closer. "You've been nothing but a goddamned devil since the beginning of the year –"

"Now, that's a bit unfair," Peeves said, giving Harry a very frank look. "If I recall correctly, all I did was inform you that there were attacks happening – I wasn't doing anything wrong there, because, after all, I made the assumption that you, ah, wanted to know." The poltergeist smirked. "Was I wrong?"

"The attacks are over," Harry said in a low voice, reaching the table, "so why the fuck are you still here? Why didn't you go on to whatever hell you came back from?"

Peeves gave Harry a very patient expression. "Well, Harry, I didn't want to go. All I did to get myself here was appropriate a little bit of energy that some of those souls wouldn't notice was gone and propel myself in before good old Voldemort's curse did some, ah, damage."

Harry tensed as his mind raced. But that must mean... "We're inside my head."

Peeves' smile broadened. "Very good, Harry."

"But poltergeists can't possess people," Harry continued, glancing at the window as he stepped around the side of the table, "so that's why you needed the extra energy from the freed souls to get here."

"You're two for two."

He moved even faster than he thought he could. The poltergeist's head was translucent, but Harry felt something solid beneath his fingers – Peeves had to partially manifest itself to appear here.

Harry didn't hesitate, and slammed Peeves' face into the table.

The poltergeist reeled, but the smile didn't fade. "Well, that's –"

It didn't get another word off, because Harry slammed his fist into the creature's eye. He toppled from the chair, crashing hard onto the dirty floor.

"You're in my head," Harry growled, stepping closer. "And last time I checked, I run the show in here." He bent and seized the poltergeist by the throat and heaved him into the air. "And I've wanted to do this for a long time."

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS –

The words began in her head as his hand went limp in hers, the rushing noise drifting away to leave behind screams.

"Harry – Harry –"

"NO –"

She saw McGonagall's face contort with shock and grief as she raised her wand and cast the Anti-Apparition jinx over the room – or over the entire Ministry, she couldn't tell, it looked strong enough –

She heard her mentor's bellow of unbridled rage, and two masked shadows were blasted upwards into the ceiling with a sickening crunch –

She focused on him, still hovering only feet away, a strangely dazed expression on his face as he raised his wand for the inevitable second strike –

-NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME –

The voice was getting louder, and as the scream was torn raw from her throat, she knew it would be meaningless, she knew it would only add to the cacophony of Bellatrix Lestrange's shrieking laughter and the squealing of breaking magical devices –

"Exit strategy – now!"

The voice was his, and all across the room she could see people attempting to Disapparate – but to no avail...

And there he was. The old man's eyes were already wet, but blazing a more intense fury than she had ever seen. This wasn't the anger of a man who had been wronged or the frustrated rage of a failure.

This was the fury of a teacher who had lost his most prized student, the master losing the best apprentice, the father losing his only son.

Amplified by the sheer primal power of the most skilled and powerful wizard on the planet.

The only one he ever feared.

"Nobody," Dumbledore said, his voice magically amplified through a mask of fury, "is going anywhere."

White-hot lightning forked from his outstretched wand, and his shield only barely held, but Dumbledore wasn't done. Light and colour exploded forth from the wand, with sounds that were both unearthly and terrifying.

-POTTER HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS HARRY –

Now the Death Eaters were screaming as their master was forced back, crushed against the ceiling by an avalanche of magic beyond their worst nightmares...

The stream of magic was broken for a second – Bellatrix had deflected it for an instant, and that was the only moment he needed. He slammed his wand against the ceiling and screamed words that would have been incomprehensible even in silence –

And then the ceiling exploded.

Black rock cascaded downwards, smashing more of the delicate magical machinery to bits below them as the field that kept them afloat continued to sputter. Even more dust filled the air as the Death Eaters thrashed and pulled their way towards the exit...

They're getting away.

He's getting away.

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS –

And then...

Something just broke.

"Oh, that's quite the hit –"

His fist drove into the poltergeist's gut, blasting the air out of him.

"Just look at you go –"

The poltergeist hit the wall head-first, a satisfying crunch splitting the air. But somehow Peeves was still awake, his eyes glittering and his smile widening –

"All that strength, all that will, and it does you so much good –"

He seized Peeves by the throat, his fingers digging into the windpipe as he smashed the poltergeist into the glass. It cracked beneath the impact, but it didn't fall away or reveal anything behind it...

"Why," Harry snarled, "do you think that you would get off trying to just arrive right before everything went to hell? Did you honestly think, you waste of air, that someone wouldn't do something about this?"

"Well, considering you're not doing all that much, I figured – OOF!"

Harry lowered his booted foot as the poltergeist reeled from the kick to the stomach. "You don't just get off taunting me and being a worthless voice of nonsense, you despicable piece of shit – and in here, I have the capacity to hurt you." His fist balled tighter. "And believe me, I'm enjoying this –"

"I'm sure you are." Peeves' eyes narrowed, but his smile never wavered. "Unfortunately, it really doesn't do you all that much good, all things considered. All that strength and you haven't yet managed to, ah, cause any real damage." The poltergeist climbed to his feet and gestured back towards the table. "But then again, I'm not here in your head to gloat or to make light of your situation. If anything, I've got a number of, ah, things you might want to know." Peeves gave him a knowing smile. "I mean, it's your party in here."

"Maybe then I should just rip you apart and divine any information you have from your quivering organs," Harry said in a low voice, his mind latching onto the darkest threat he could think of as he glared daggers at the poltergeist. "Trelawney never gave us the details, but I'm sure I could figure it out –"

"Oh, no, no, no, that would be such a waste of time." Peeves waved his hand dismissively as he returned to the table and sat down. "Because, you know, I'm going to tell you everything – that's why I'm here."

"And then what?" Harry snarled. "You going to offer me some loaded deal that will ultimately cost me my soul?"

Peeves gave an uncharacteristic sigh. "You take all the fun out of things, Harry – but to answer your question, it's not something I can do, and I certainly can't make you do anything." Peeves glanced past Harry. "That's mostly her doing, though."

Harry spun around, and even though it shocked him for a fraction of a second, he still couldn't work himself up to be that surprised.

"Su Li," he muttered.

The girl gave him a disdainful look as she leaned lightly against the wall. Her robes were highly professional, much like those he had worn in his Clarissa Desdame simulacrum, and every inch of her posture and distant expression suggested the only reason she was there was because of a professional obligation.

"See, given her little connection with you," Peeves explained, raising a hand in deference to the Ravenclaw girl, "I can't, ah, say things that might directly or indirectly push you towards a certain path, one way or another. Suffice to say, besides saving Hogwarts and guiding that little magic sphere straight to the Department of Mysteries, Su Li and the rest of your simulacrums are quite the boon." Peeves winked. "I ought to applaud such rigorous exploitation of the living and the dead, it's really quite extraordinary."

"Why did you disrupt Cassane's ritual?" Harry demanded, not sitting down.

"Well, Miss Li already told you that," Peeves replied patiently. "It was a crime against Death, and I was simply preventing things from reaching an unsatisfactory conclusion –"

"But you couldn't have known he was going to do any of it," Harry retorted, slamming his palms against the table and leaning closer. "You only started appearing once Nott began freeing the spirits – you couldn't have known about Cassane, you couldn't have had a plan!"

Peeves gave Harry a very frank look. "Do I look like the kind of guy with a plan?"

Harry eyed the poltergeist with equal parts hatred and disbelief. "I don't know what to think about poltergeists that start off crazy and then just get evil."

"Now, Harry, let's not throw around words like 'evil' without some, ah, context." Peeves steadily returned Harry's gaze as he leaned back in the chair. "Evil's such a strong word, with lots of emotion behind it that it really doesn't quite deserve, I think. And it's so subjective too... I think if you consider things, I'm not so much evil as someone who just, you know, points out the obvious, at least to anyone who's paying attention." The poltergeist gave a wink. "You know, from a certain point of view."

"And in my head, I'd like to think that the only point of view that matters is mine," Harry growled. "Get to the point."

"When our good friend Mr. Nott began smashing the barriers on his crude little quest for Voldemort... well, I didn't get less crazy and more evil." Peeves' smile deepened. "It was just that some of the elements of my personality that some Headmasters had found a bit troublesome returned. Gave me a bit more subtlety, a bit more control. I didn't need to waste my time with little pranks and shenanigans, despite them having their place... no, I had other things I wanted to do." The poltergeist leaned closer. "And I've got to say, between you and your former Potions Professor, I really enjoyed the conversations."

"But why?" Harry leaned closer, and tried to look into the poltergeist's glinting eyes. "Once again, I don't see your plan –"

"Who says I had one?" Peeves replied, with a giggle as he tapped his chin with a long finger. "You living humans and your plans – labyrinthine things, and you think they'll get you on the right path. You have plans, Voldemort has plans, Cassane has... well, had plans, Dumbledore has plans." The poltergeist spread his hands wide. "You all have plans, but sometimes, all you need to do is react to someone's plan, and it saves you so much time. That way, I don't need to make any plans... I can just sit and watch as everything

comes together, and then just react whenever I think it would bring a real smile to my face."

"But you have to want something," Harry pursued, his eyes narrowing as he pressed his fingers into the table. "There must be a reason..."

"Harry, I'm a poltergeist," Peeves said calmly, his grin widening. "Why would I, ah, need reasons for anything I do? Do you think I annoyed Filch and caused chaos because I had some nefarious scheme? Do you think I threw water balloons or lit fires because there was some rationale behind it all?" The poltergeist's smile deepened. "See, look, once you're dead, you don't need reasons anymore... I don't need to justify what I do or why I do it, so you just stop devising reasons and just do things. No responsibilities, no rationale, no goals." Peeves' eyes gleamed as he drummed his fingers on the table and cast his gaze skyward. "It's like Neverland... everywhere."

"Then what are you doing in my head?"

"Ah." Peeves leaned back in his chair. "Well, just because I don't need reasons or goals for everything doesn't mean I don't have them – and I'm truly hurt by the fact you thought I was here to hurt you, by the way. I want to help you, Harry Potter."

Harry didn't believe it for a second. "You're lying."

Peeves glanced at Su. "She'd stop me if I was, Harry. But really, I think you would appreciate some of the things I could offer you."

"I don't see how you, a poltergeist, are in the position to offer me anything," Harry said harshly. "What do you have that I could possibly want?"

"Information," Peeves replied, his voice abruptly dropping as he glanced at the window. "You want to know what those windows are, Harry?"

"I'm assuming a mental delusion," Harry replied. "Much like my general assumptions about you."

"It's a Memory Charm, Harry," Peeves said softly, his smile and gaze never wavering as he eyed Harry. "A very intricate one, crafted with great skill and augmented with other magic, but a Memory Charm nonetheless. And like all Memory Charms, it can be broken."

Harry tensed – had somebody been inside his head... "You're lying."

"Well, it's not like you'd remember them casting it on you," Peeves replied, tapping a long finger twice on the table.

"But who –"

"I can tell you," Peeves said in a sing-song voice, "but then again, that's the point: I can't untell you. Once you know, you know. This is the sort of thing that you never quite get over once you remember it."

Peeves smirked. "You should ask Miss Granger about that some time."

Harry didn't hesitate in slamming his fist as hard as he could into the poltergeist's nose – and grimly satisfied that Su Li didn't stop him or even react to the attack.

"Well, perhaps that was a bit of a cheap shot," Peeves replied fairly, massaging his broken nose before cracking it loudly back into place. "But the fact remains that those glass walls are Memory Charms, and I'm here to help you break them."

"Why?" His voice sounded ragged, as if he was breathing hard, but it didn't feel like he was panting at all. "Why would you care? What do you gain from all of this?"

Peeves raised his hands and smiled, simply and sweetly. "I, ah, know what's on the other side."

"What the... how?" Harry's frustration was surging to the surface again, and his palms pressed against the table as he leaned close. "How the fuck can you know what's inside my head that I don't even know?"

"Well, I could say that I just know you better than you know yourself, Harry," Peeves replied with an insufferable chuckle, "but I'm not going to give myself that much credit." The poltergeist sighed theatrically. "No, it was sufficient that when I blew my way in here, I just caught a glimpse... but oh, what a glimpse it was..."

"And besides," Peeves added, his voice suddenly matter-of-fact, "I'm not the only one who knows."

Harry glanced behind him at Su Li, who was still glaring holes into his back. "What, she knew too?"

"When you enter a person's mind, Harry," Peeves explained patiently, folding his hands, "you see things. And while the big stuff is there, it's the little things that catch notice and really stand out. And this Memory Charm, as complex and intricate as it is – a masterpiece among charms, as it is – it was made to be the littlest of little things. A tiny, insubstantial speck that gleams all the brighter when you flash a light, the last dust cloud to be cleared away. So when she tacitly, ah, stepped in, she saw it, and saw right past it."

"But how..."

"Glass, Harry," the poltergeist whispered. "It's all glass... you know, I get the feeling the one who cast it – and there can only be one – I think he designed it that way. Designed it in a way that on the right day, and with the right hammer... you could see everything."

Harry kept his gaze on Su. "And it would just be too easy to just tell me what's on the other side of this supposed charm?"

Her glare told him everything he needed to know to answer that question.

"That's not the way it works, Harry," Peeves said, leaning closer. "You have to see."

"I can just choose not to." Harry took a deep breath as he faced the poltergeist, dropping into and leaning back in his own chair. "Yeah, I

could do that. If somebody that powerful wants to put a Memory Charm on me, it's probably for good reason."

Peeves sniffed with disapproval. "Harry, we both know that's not going to happen. If you want to take that path and just skip all the way to the ending, it's not going to turn out well for you. Say things, ah, improve, and you return to the land of the 'living', you'll know there's a charm there. You'll know someone has meddled with your mind – and the best part is, you'll never know what is missing.

"Can you imagine what that would be like? Every new face you see, you'll wonder if you have already met them. Every person you meet, you'll wonder if they were the one to cast that charm, or if they had said something they wanted you to forget, and are lying behind their teeth, a friendly smile plastered over their knowing thoughts. Everything, even the most meaningless of trifles, will become quintessential in your eyes to unraveling the truth locked away inside your own mind. You'll obsess over every statement, every fraction of a second, every instant of expression, in the hopes of uncovering even the paltriest of links. And you thought your paranoia in August and September was something?" Peeves giggled to himself. "Oh, you haven't seen anything yet."

Harry was silent – what could he say to that?

"You'll never trust another soul again, Harry," Peeves whispered. "And just like our good friend Voldemort wants you to be, you'll be completely, utterly alone. But this time, not of his doing, but of your own. Everything, everyone that ever mattered to you will be driven away by your obsessive paranoia – you've been through it once already."

The poltergeist paused. "I guess that makes this both prophetic and profoundly ironic."

"What so ironic about it?" Harry snapped.

Peeves smiled simply. "Break the glass and find out."

Harry got to his feet and slowly began to circle the table, his hand balled into a fist. "Which pane?"

"Ooh, good one."

"Are both of these for the same memory?" Harry said in a low voice, "or are you going to tell me that two people have meddled with my head?"

"No, just one," Peeves replied, tapping his chin. "You should break the right one first, I think."

"Why?"

"Can't you just trust me?"

Harry completely ignored the almost plaintive note in the poltergeist's voice and kept circling – and then suddenly swung his fist at the left pane of glass.

The poltergeist smirked. "Well, I warned you."

The glass split into a spiderweb crack at the impact of Harry's punch – and without warning, it dissolved entirely. He was off balance, his fist soaring out into the void, and he was stumbling down –

He saw the attack first.

Her hair was oscillating with every colour as she began to cast spells. Her hair went yellow for a split second as she disarmed a Death Eater and then cursed him into a stone wall with his own wand. That wand she used to propel herself, spraying sparks and fire to blast herself through the air, screaming curses and hexes and all matter of spells –

Her hair was emerald green when she transfigured a Death Eater's blood to acid.

Her hair was white as snow when she froze the air in a Death Eater's lungs.

Her hair was vivid purple as she deflected a slew of razor-edged knives cast by Bellatrix and sent them chasing after the mad Death Eater with the speed and dangerous accuracy of a guided rocket.

She didn't care if the Death Eater saw her coming or not. She didn't care if the Death Eater was prepared or armed or was pleading for mercy. They were just obstacles.

She was a spirit, floating on sparks and magic and tears, clawing her way towards the opening where Voldemort was making his exit up into the Atrium right above them, sending debris and dust tumbling downwards in his wake –

Yet outside of the curses she screamed, she called no epithets. She ignored any precepts of duelling or proper combat. Any vestige of training and good practice had dropped away to be replaced with blinding speed and ferocious intensity.

She didn't need to say a word. They all knew what she was after.

And here I am, drifting by an arch to whatever comes beyond... and I do nothing.

I have enabled another break. The pattern continues again.

Just another way I have failed.

He was sitting in the kitchen of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. The candles were dimmed in the cavernous room, and the remnants of dinnerware were stacked neatly in the sink. Outside of a few cobwebs and the spiders that undoubtedly inhabited them, the room was empty.

"What the..." Harry rose to his feet and glanced around the darkened room. A glance out of the window told him it was night, but the last time he had been at Grimmauld Place was over the summer, and there had always been people around...

And then he saw it on the table. A grimy basin, a dirty black basin that he had seen before, that he knew Mrs. Weasley had used for cooking but that Dumbledore had recognized as something greater... a pot he had later seen in Snape's house, filled with memories that had been revelations he knew he had needed but he wished he had never had to see.

"The Black Pensieve," Harry whispered, glancing inside – only to see a glimmer of silver at the very bottom. "You've got to be –"

The explosion of motion caught him off-guard, and he staggered against the wall as two people shot out of the Pensieve. One was tall, old, and wore a very grim expression on his face.

The other was Harry's mirror-duplicate, his ragged over-sized T-shirt stained with blood.

Harry stepped back as he saw his duplicate stagger, his hand to his forehead, his eyes wide and staring as he clutched the edge of the table.

"No... no..."

Dumbledore put a hand on memory-Harry's shoulder. "I am sorry, Harry... I really am."

"That was a prophecy," memory-Harry whispered. "That... that was a real prophecy that Professor Trelawney gave –"

"I mentioned just over a year ago that it was her second," Dumbledore replied steadily. "And you understand why despite certain elements, ah, ambiguous in her qualifications, why she must remain at Hogwarts for her safety."

"But why would she need to, Snape was a Death Eater and he overheard the whole thing..." –Memory-Harry's voice trailed off as his confusion was quickly replaced by rage. "And you let him... and you let him teach at Hogwarts AFTER HE TOLD VOLDEMORT ABOUT MY MUM AND DAD?"

"Harry, I can explain –"

"I'm sure you can," memory-Harry snarled, his eyes flaring as he rounded on Dumbledore. "Like why the hell you haven't contacted me ALL DAMN SUMMER? And now, once I'm in trouble, you decide to get involved? Maybe I should have wished the Dementors had come sooner so I would have gotten out of there –"

"Harry, it is for your protection that you return to Privet Drive every summer," Dumbledore replied, his voice still not rising to match the shouting of Harry's duplicate. "When your mother died to save you, her protection conveys to those of her blood, her sister and your aunt being the last of that group. While you remain under her roof, you cannot be touched by Lord Voldemort or those who wear his mark. It is a more powerful and fail-proof protection than many that I know."

Dumbledore closed his eyes, a surprisingly weary expression on his face. "And thus you understand our panic, when you chose to flee... for not only were you being chased by the Ministry, but there was grave danger that he would touch you in another way."

Harry's duplicate looked confused, and he ran a dirty hand through his hair. "I... but I never saw Voldemort."

"I suspect with growing certainty that he has chosen to make his attack in a very different way," Dumbledore said, his expression hardening as he glanced away from Harry. "I suspect the Dementors were his idea – easy enough to sway to his banner, and easy enough to dismiss when charges are brought to the Ministry should you escape. Instead, he waits until you flee from the house, on the run, before he makes his move..."

"What move?" memory-Harry asked impatiently, with sentiments that the real Harry immediately shared.

"What if I told you," Dumbledore asked instead, glancing at Harry, his eyes filled with not with grim bitterness, but a great, terrible sadness, "that Parseltongue was not the only thing you inherited from Lord Voldemort the night he tried to kill you?"

The mouths of two Harry's dropped open with shock. "I... I... what?"

"You may have been having strange dreams this summer, Harry," Dumbledore continued, gesturing for Harry to sit. "I regret to inform you that these may not have been your dreams, but those forged of the connection between you two – a connection only strengthened by his taking of your blood during his rebirth."

The mirror of Harry dropped into a chair, a look of daze and growing horror spreading across his face. "I... they're just dreams of a corridor, with a black door at the end... and I want something beyond that door..."

"He searches for the very prophecy you just heard, Harry," Dumbledore replied sombrely. "When the bartender of the Hog's Head interrupted Snape's eavesdropping, he was only able to take a fragment back to Lord Voldemort. This fragment has vexed Voldemort for a long time, and he craves the knowledge of that prophecy that led to his downfall. You see reflections of this, through the dreams you see in your unconscious mind. I did not suspect that Voldemort was aware of this connection... until tonight, that is."

There was real horror on his duplicate's face now, and Harry felt a chill spread in his own gut. "What do you mean?"

"Simply put, the events are too much of a coincidence and require too many moving parts to not be Voldemort's doing." Dumbledore shook his head sadly as he sat next to memory-Harry. "He dispatches two agents of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to your dwelling – perhaps sleeper agents under his control, or perhaps two unwitting pawns receiving and acting upon early information – and when you are forced to fight and run, you step outside your mother's protections. All he then needs to do is extend simple, undetectable suggestions across your connection, and guide you into a deadly situation. The Muggle aeroplane is a different choice, one even I do not quite fathom at the moment, but it is brutally effective. Your reputation is tarnished again, and blood is placed on your hands."

"But I could have died!" memory-Harry exclaimed, his eyes widening. "He took that kind of risk –"

"Even knowing of your considerable Quidditch skills from Lucius Malfoy, who grudgingly but inevitably heard it from Draco himself, I do not think Voldemort believes you would have died tonight." A strange, bitter smile came onto Dumbledore's lips. "No, he believed in the 'armour' of the prophecy, as it is. He would not believe that the one destined to stop him would die in a simple accident."

"But it might not be me," memory-Harry whispered, his breathing coming faster. "It... it could be anybody..."

"In fact, Harry, there was initial speculation that this prophecy applied to two boys." Dumbledore gave Harry a nod of approval. "Both born as the seventh month dies, and both born to parents who had defied Voldemort three times. The first was you. The second was Neville Longbottom."

"So it could have been Neville," memory-Harry said desperately. "Voldemort could have screwed up, it could have been him —"

"Remember the next line of the prophecy, Harry," Dumbledore replied, his expression very grim. "'And he will mark him as his equal'. Voldemort did not choose to go after the pureblood Neville, but the half-blood, like himself. He did not choose to attack the son of an ideology that he espoused, but something far more personal to him. For not only did he see you as a threat, he saw as something closer to a mirror, with too many uncomfortable similarities to be ignored."

"And tonight," Dumbledore concluded, his voice hardening, "he got his final bit of proof."

"What —"

"In reaching across the connection and sending those suggestions, undetectable as they were, and having them take root enough for you to dive to the slipstream of a Muggle aeroplane, risking your life and those of the men who dared to chase you, in his mind, the final parallel is complete — and forcing blood to be thus shed only seals it."

"But if you're right, he was the one who forced the choice, not me!" memory-Harry exclaimed wildly, his knuckles white as he faced Dumbledore. "If he forced me to do it, how can there be a parallel?"

"He may have forced the choice," Dumbledore replied softly, his voice suddenly soft and sad again, "but he did not force the capacity."

Memory-Harry's hand rose to his lips, and his eyes widened with horror as Dumbledore's words began to sink in.

"The final statement of the prophecy," Dumbledore whispered, taking Harry's hands in his, "are 'And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.' Voldemort does not know these words, but they establish both in him and in you something that cannot be denied – to defeat him, you must kill him. And for a long time, Harry, I worried... I feared that a young man such as yourself, full of compassion and hope and love, would not be able to kill, even him. There is a line that is crossed, Harry, in taking the life of another, even indirectly." Dumbledore blinked quickly and glanced away for a second. "Particularly indirectly."

"But tonight, you showed that you did indeed have the capacity. And let me tell you this, Harry, if you could have gone for the rest of your life without knowing it until the necessary moment, I would not have dared take that away from you. The knowledge that you not only have the means to end another's life, but the capacity within yourself to do so, is a great and terrible thing."

"I didn't want this," memory-Harry whispered. "I... I didn't want – "

"How did you think everything would eventually end?" Dumbledore replied quietly. "It is a horrible thing to lose your innocence so young, Harry – believe me, I know."

"You mean..." Memory-Harry looked up into Dumbledore's blue eyes. "Who?"

"It... it is not important," Dumbledore said, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "But I can give you this: just because one has the capacity

to kill does not mean one must kill. Just because the tool available for a job does not mean it needs to be used.

"But I have faith in you, Harry."

"You... you do?" memory-Harry blurted. "Why?"

"Because you are a good person," Dumbledore replied simply. "You are a kind, decent, compassionate young man, who is courageous enough to fight and strong enough to endure. Voldemort and his tenterhooks will never hold you, no matter how hard he tries."

"But how can you be sure of that?"

"Harry –"

"If I'm such a 'good person'," memory-Harry continued, slowly getting to his feet, his voice getting louder, "then how did Voldemort get in and do... and do what he did? How can I prevent it from ever happening again?"

"If I knew how to sever the connection that binds the two of you together," Dumbledore replied, "I would have done it as soon as I learned it existed – when you and I together discovered you could speak Parseltongue. But I genuinely do not know how."

Memory-Harry raised his hands helplessly, his expression filled with growing anger. "Well, fat lot of good that does me! What the hell am I supposed to do if Voldemort sends more suggestions I can't 'detect' through and tries to make kill again?"

Dumbledore paused. "Well," he began after a few minutes, "there is an obscure branch of magic called Occlumency, which allows one to shield one's mind from external penetration. I can teach you this, Harry, but I suspect it might not work."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, for one it is a difficult brand of magic to learn, and extremely difficult to master. Not that I am doubting of your abilities, Harry, but

even such magic would only muzzle Voldemort's attempts to penetrate your thoughts, and only when you are concentrating at all times. And Voldemort is unyielding, and when he begins to suspect that you are using Occlumency to defend yourself, I fear what new attacks he may use upon you." Dumbledore's expression was grave. "Worse still, he may choose to simply cause as much collateral damage as he can through the link, damaging the memories, feelings, thoughts, and personality that make you who you are."

It was clear from his expression that Harry's memory duplicate was losing control. "But... but what can we do then?"

Dumbledore was quiet for a long few seconds, and then he looked away, glancing down into the Pensieve. "There is an obscure charm, an extraordinarily complex charm much like a Memory Charm in design, but more detailed in function. It does not immediately remove the memory as it does blur it away over a very short period of time. But unlike the Memory Charm, it does not solely target the instance of memory itself."

"What does that mean?"

Dumbledore looked back at Harry, a very grim expression on his face. "Emotions, Harry. The grief, the anger, the feelings coursing through you associated with tonight... they will be wiped away. It will not only eventually be as if the event has never occurred to you, but as if the very emotions spurred by the event will be washed away. If one brings it up to you, you will not feel responsible for it – for in your mind, you are not responsible."

"And how does this stop Voldemort?" memory-Harry asked, swallowing hard.

"Such a spell," Dumbledore continued, "will travel across your mind very differently than a common Memory Charm. I hypothesize that it may reach the link between your mind and Voldemort's, and just as his suggestions entered your mind, this spell might cross the void and enter his, wiping away the very thought of using such suggestions to manipulate you. That does not guarantee he might not come across the idea again, but it will significantly slow him down – ideas do not

come easy, particularly forgotten ones. And given he will not have told his Death Eaters of his plan to attack you in this manner – such an intensely personal connection, he would have kept with utmost secrecy – it is unlikely such an attack will be attempted again for a long time, if at all."

"The charm... the charm can do all that?" memory-Harry asked incredulously. "Forgive me for saying this, but that sounds... well, incredible. Too good to be true."

"It can when there is a man of my modest skill such as myself casting it," Dumbledore replied with a firm nod. "But there is a catch."

"What?"

"Paranoia," Dumbledore replied simply, his eyes darkening. Harry, even despite being in a memory, nearly took an involuntary step backwards. "I do not recommend this plan, Harry, if only because it replaces those emotions of grief and fear and replaces them with something ugly. The human mind naturally rebels against penetration in the simplest of settings – that is why we, as a civilization, tend to resist new ideas. With a penetration such as this, the response will be even more pronounced. Your mind will turn inwards and lash out at anything that might perceive that event in any way, shape, or form.

"And the paranoia may take many forms. You may perceive friends attempting to help you as instead blaming you for the event, drawing anger and mistrust. And worse still, the mind will actively rebel against the caster of the spell, drawing even greater distrust and hostility. The mind is a great thing, Harry – it will perceive the intrusion and set itself against the intruder, with anger that may appear irrational to those around you.

"And I know very well this sounds selfish," Dumbledore said quietly, and Harry was shocked to see the old man take a composing breath, "but it would break my heart to see you lose trust in me. Even though I have great faith in whatever you might plan to do, and I would respect any distance you chose to make between us... it would be very difficult for me, Harry."

Memory-Harry looked like he was thinking as hard as he possibly could, and after a few moments of silence, he frowned. "But... look, if I push everyone away because of this spell, who's going to try and help –"

"There will be some who support unequivocally and without question, who will never leave your side," Dumbledore replied, blinking slowly as he looked up at Harry. "And if that proves not to be enough... I can help in that regard."

Memory-Harry frowned. "What do you mean, you can help, if the spell might push me against you –"

"Trust me, Harry," Dumbledore replied seriously as he slowly rose to his feet. "I can handle it."

Memory-Harry closed his eyes and there was a thrill in Harry's stomach as he watched his duplicate make a decision.

"Do it."

"Are you sure, Harry?"

"I can't let Voldemort mess with my mind anymore." Memory-Harry blinked and took a steadying breath. "What if he makes me turn on my friends, or lures me into a trap, or... no, I can't let that happen."

Dumbledore reached into his robes and pulled his wand free. "I understand. A difficult sacrifice to make, and one I respect."

"To be alone?"

"You may feel alone," Dumbledore said softly, "but I promise you there will always be someone to stand at your side. It may not always be who you expect, but they will always remain. And I will always hold my faith in you, Harry."

"I'm sorry that you have to do this, Professor."

"So am I," Dumbledore whispered, and for an instant, Harry could hear the old man's voice quiver. "So am I."

He pointed his wand at memory-Harry's head, and whispered, "Deleocausus."

There was no light from Dumbledore's wand, but immediately his duplicate's eyes went glassy. They didn't lose focus, as if he had been hit with a regular Memory Charm – instead, they only seemed to stiffen, as if the memory was being encased in glass and then hidden away like a fragile piece of china...

Harry held his breath, but a few seconds later, his duplicate began to breathe easily again, his eyes still a little glassy.

"You know," the duplicate whispered, "you know I'm going to know you cast the charm on me. I'm going to figure it out... and I might try to break it –"

"I know," Dumbledore said calmly, "and thus, I'm very sorry to do this. Obliviate!"

She had made it to the empty Atrium – and she could see him running.

Oh, he didn't run – he simply moved quickly, with the same gait as if he was casually taking a stroll. Running was for a common man, not him. Not for the Dark Lord, for the man who had subverted a prophecy and every plan...

Who had killed Harry...

"GLISSEO!"

She didn't know why she yelled the spell. Perhaps because she knew it wasn't one that targeted him, and thus would be difficult to shield against. Perhaps it was because it was her favourite spell, as she loved to see everyone just as clumsy as her.

And she didn't even expect it to work. It was a garden-variety spell, the sort that was taught to children and the worst duellists. It was a cheap spell in every sense of the word.

And yet somehow he stumbled. It was only for an instant, but she saw the slip – she saw the slight moment of uncertainty, the slowing of the gait to regain proper footing, and it was enough.

The curse leapt to her lips.

"AVADA –"

She couldn't complete the curse. Pain had exploded across every fibre of her being – every bone was on fire, she wanted to black out –

The pain vanished – and then her wand slipped from her fingers as she felt herself ripped from the ground, cast upwards – and then she was streaking towards the stone floor –

CRACK.

Blood spurted upwards into her face as she saw jagged bone splitting the skin just above her kneecaps – but then she was in the air again, a broken marionette tossed around by a cackling witch, and now streaking towards the floor again –

This time it was her forearms that shattered as she tried to break her fall with her hands. She could feel broken fingers as she soared into the air again, undoubtedly for the killing blow, but she knew if she could only get her hands on her wand, she could cast the one curse that made them all equal –

And then there was a scream she didn't recognize.

She hit the stone hard on her hands again, this time breaking her nose on impact, and she couldn't help scream with pain, but she hadn't been slammed against it like before... that scream had been different, it hadn't been –

And then she saw something that she had never dreamed she would see.

She saw an oval almost three stories high, the edges sparking as if it had been freshly cut. But this oval was not opaque – it was a window... no, a gate, and something was climbing through, talons reaching and clawing towards him, who was quickly backpedalling to get away from the monster –

But there was someone on the monster's back, spraying shots of hot white light that rang off the stone floor like a collapsing cathedral, adding a new din to the cacophony, a noise only made louder by the seismic screech of a primal creature ready to unleash its wrath...

Oh my god, she thought, her rage only briefly quelled for a moment of utter disbelief. Dumbledore brought a dragon into the Ministry of Magic.

Even as he returned to the dingy, badly-lit interrogation room, he couldn't catch his breath.

He knew that didn't make any sense at all – it was his mind, he didn't need air here – but maybe it was just a fact of his mind reeling...

"It explains..."

"One of the leading factors of why you were just a colossal tool in those first few months," Peeves replied conversationally. "Or, at least it gives you something of an explanation. And to think you did it to yourself –"

"Shut up," Harry whispered, pressing his palms against the table as he stared down, his mind still racing to process the new information.

He had suspected that there had been a connection between him and Voldemort – of course there was, it was how Hermione was attacked – but now he had solid proof. He now knew...

"I have the capacity to kill."

Peeves rolled his eyes. "Well, you already knew that – perhaps that's why you actually managed to pull the metaphorical trigger when you offed Aphrodite Zabini. Maybe it's 'cause you knew all along."

"And that's why Dumbledore's always supported me," Harry murmured, pressing a hand to his forehead. "He knew the whole time..."

"He's your man, through and through, Harry Potter," the poltergeist remarked, drumming his fingers on the arms of the chair. "Through and through. Even when you need a little someone to screw around in that head of yours..."

Harry ignored Peeves. His mind had finally latched on one of the final phrases Dumbledore had said...

And if that proves not to be enough... I can help in that regard.

Oh my god.

He didn't want to believe it.

"You know... once you lose someone like that... she's gone, forever, and you'll never replace her."

It wasn't true.

"Look, I never would have expected this or any feelings, or planned for them, or even dreamed of them... but it happened. And as much as I think about it, I can't explain it either – and believe me, I've tried to. But... but maybe that's the point, I guess. We can't know or explain everything..."

It couldn't be true.

"Harry... Harry, I don't know if I... fuck, Harry, I just... I can't fucking articulate how terrified.... I don't want to lose myself – that's how it feels, it feels like I'm losing who I am and becoming something else, something I can't control... something I don't know. No... fuck, no! I'm not going to let that happen! Not to... not to this."

Peeves let out a giggle. "Yeah, you finally got there, didn't you?"

"NO!"

The table was ripped free of the bolts holding it to the floor. It clipped Peeves under the chin and the poltergeist sprawled backwards – only for the full weight of the table to come crashing down on him.

But even that wasn't enough. The chair skidded towards the wall with an echoing bang as Harry kicked it as hard as he could –

"It doesn't change things."

His breathing was wild and uneven, he knew his eyes were wide and bloodshot with rage, he knew there were tears of grief and fury streaking his face, and even as the red-drenched haze rose over his vision, he saw Su Li, her expression supremely disdainful...

"You... you knew all along."

Su's expression cracked for just an instant, and Harry saw a fleeting ember of compassion, and he realized that she was the person Su had wanted him to save...

"Well, I think there's been just about enough of this."

Harry turned back around, and it was as if he hadn't flipped the table. In fact, instead of the plain steel surface, now there was a black, opaque tablecloth draped across it.

And Peeves was still smiling.

"What," Harry growled, his patience at its very end, "do you want?"

Peeves raised a hand. "Look under the table."

"I just flipped the goddamn table, there's nothing there."

Peeves let out another dry giggle. "Oh, you might want to check again."

I can humour him, Harry thought darkly as he strode towards the table to tear away the tablecloth, and if he's screwing around again, I can just rip his face off –

"HOLY FUCK!"

Peeves openly laughed as Harry quickly scrambled back at the sight – the horrific sight.

It looked like an infant that been flensed open by a cheese grater and pruning shears. Whatever skin that was left on the creature was in stringy fragments that swam in blood. Every muscle twitched, every motion was a contortion.

And its eyes were endless, soulless, and black.

"What is that?"

"That," Peeves said primly, "is a little... shall I say, symbol of what our friend Voldemort's little connection with you really is. I'm sure you don't doubt the appropriate choice of imagery, of course..."

"Why is it here?" Harry snarled, shoving the tablecloth back over the horrific aberration. "I don't want to see that –".

"Because now we come the very crux of our discussion," Peeves said, his voice finally beginning to soften. His eyes still gleamed with raw malice, but there was something about the subtle change in volume that held Harry's attention more than ever. "You saw in the memory that you and Dumbledore took drastic action to prevent Voldemort from exploiting such a connection – and a lot of good it did, until Voldemort decided to exploit it again." Peeves tapped a finger twice on the table. "But I'm here with a new option: to destroy it entirely."

Harry raised a hand, and as if he animated it, the chair slid back to his grasp. "And... and I'm supposed to believe you can do that?"

"Mr. Voldemort already did most of the job with his little Killing Curse," Peeves said with a sniff, "so I can't take all the credit – but I can, ah, tidy things up, as it is. Take out the trash, break the connection, end that little line from you to the snake once and for all."

"So what's the catch?"

Peeves' smile widened. "I take its place."

Harry's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Harry, Harry, Harry, is it so much to ask for a little ghost to have a chance to live again?" Peeves' eyes gleamed greedily as he leaned forward across the table. "I'm already here, Harry, it won't require any opening any doors. I just want to... rearrange the furniture, if that makes any sense."

"You want to possess me." Harry let out a harsh laugh. "And you think I'm going to buy this?"

"Except it's not really possession," Peeves said, his eyes lighting up. "See, Harry, you really have quite the soul, and even with you bouncing around from body to body, your soul just has so much potency I wouldn't be able to possess you. And besides, this is less of me sharing with you as it is... merging." Peeves winked. "Filling in the spaces."

"You're insane," Harry spat. "Completely fucking insane. If you think that I'm going to let you merge with me –"

"Oh, and why is that?" Peeves gave a mocking frown. "Is it because I'm just too much of a nice guy?"

"How about a sociopathic deranged poltergeist that might just be completely made of mixed nuts and batshit?" Harry retorted. "That good enough for you?"

"Fine," Peeves said simply, "you can refuse. But know two things. Firstly, I cannot lie to coerce you into this little bargain – Miss Li over there is doing a mighty fine job of preventing that. And secondly..."

"No," Harry interrupted, "there's no 'secondly'. I don't need your goddamn reasons, I don't need your fucking excuses and drivel. Maybe you should just get the fuck out of my head before I find a torture that actually works on you."

"So maybe I should just go, then," Peeves said, rising to his feet and giving a theatrical sigh. "It's been a pleasure, Harry, it really has... although, I have to wonder what your plan is when Mr. Voldemort decides to try again."

"What?"

"Well," Peeves continued slowly, turning and slowly stroking his chin, "well, I can only imagine that when you return, Voldemort's going to want to try again – I mean, it worked so well the first time with Miss Granger. Who do you think will be next?"

Harry was tight-lipped. He didn't want to hear this...

"Miss Weasley? Miss Delacour? Go outside the box and try Misses Johnson, Spinnet, and Bell?" The poltergeist licked his lips. "Or will it be someone like Miss Lovegood... or even dear sweet Miss Tonks?"

"Damn you to hell."

"And when you run out of female friends – presuming Voldemort doesn't want to get too kinky – you'll think back and you'll wonder what would have happened if you had taken Peevey's little bargain all those years ago..."

"Shut up."

"And you'll start to ponder," Peeves continued, his voice growing more malevolent with every second, "just what kind of person you really are, to sacrifice all of those friends to achieve your final victory..."

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

His voice rang in the chamber as he stared down at the black tablecloth, his hands balled into fists, his decisions crumbling before his eyes to form two choices.

One was a path that was littered with corpses.

The other only had one corpse.

His.

He blinked back moisture in his eyes. He didn't want to do it. Everything about it screamed like a devious trap, a lie that he had to accept as truth even though he knew its falsehood...

A difficult sacrifice to make, and one I respect.

"Would you respect this, Professor?" Harry whispered aloud. "Would you?"

The poltergeist, much to Harry's surprise, did not comment, leaving Harry alone in complete silence.

I have only one choice.

He thought of Cassane, and what he must have felt on the night Voldemort came to him, offering him everything he had been desperately seeking. And even though he knew the situation and context was very different, he felt the exact same.

I'm dealing with the devil... and I'm expecting to come out ahead.

Either way, I lose.

He blinked, and did not look up. "Will it hurt?"

"Oh, yes."

"Will I come back?"

"That's the plan."

"Will I still be... me?"

"You have quite the soul, Harry Potter," Peeves replied with a smirk.
"You tell me."

Harry turned to Su. "And... and he hasn't lied? Everything... everything he said is true?"

She nodded, and the last of Harry's hopes died in his chest.

It felt like it took forever. He didn't count his breaths, even as he breathed. He didn't know how long he stood motionless, staring down into blackness... the longest seconds that, for all he knew, were passing in nothing but an instant.

In saving them, I lose myself.

Harry took a deep breath, and he felt as if he was standing in the kitchen of Number 12, Grimmauld Place, waiting for his life to change forever.

"Do it."

And everything was pain. Every iota of his being, every organelle of his body, every particle of his existence, every thought and memory turned to raw agony in an instant...

And he experienced the pain. He could not scream, he could not thrash, he could not relieve anything as every piece of him was nothing but the ideal of agony itself, distilled to its core, to its very soul...

And then he heard the voice. He could discern the voice despite the pain, but the voice was pain as well – a new breed of pain, something alien, something unnatural, something not of himself, something from beyond...

This time he knew the voice. He recognized the smug satisfaction, the cool, collected triumph, the hidden cackle of a long-fought victory,

the tremor of revelling in the last piece placed in an eternal puzzle. Every demon and daemon, every beast and devil, every aberration and monster... it was as if they were all speaking in the same united voice... the voice of an age-old poltergeist, an embodiment of chaos itself, finally seizing the scrap of life that death denied.

"Well, this won't do... there's hardly room for three in here. I think it's time to make a little... space."

"There is nowhere left to run, Tom."

She froze in her crawl, her wand finally an inch away from her broken hand, to see Albus Dumbledore raise his wand and point it straight at him.

"Nowhere to run," Dumbledore said harshly, "between me, and a dragon."

The Dark Lord's eyes were wide with fury, but he did not give an inch. "You dare to bring a beast such as this into your Ministry? Destroy everything you worked oh so hard to build?"

"We can rebuild," Dumbledore replied. "Hagrid, now."

The dragon inhaled, and she braced herself for the incoming inferno that would sweep over them, blast her into powder –

And there was the sound of racing footfalls, of breaking wood on stone, and she felt a hand around her and she saw a wand snap up –

The inferno swept around them, and she screamed – but it did not touch them. She could feel Moody's shaking arm holding her close as the magical shield around them shuddered violently, the flames hungrily shredding at its protection...

And then the flames vanished – and he was still standing.

"I'm still here, Dumbledore!" There was a high-pitched laugh that split the air, and she could hear Bellatrix's cackle accent it. "And I won! I

beat the prophecy at last, and damned your finest at the end! Harry Potter is dead!"

HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS HARRY POTTER HIS NAME IS –

"NO!"

She could barely hold a wand with broken fingers, but she clawed it upwards and pointed it at him, all of her hatred and grief and emotion pouring out into the curse –

A curse he deflected with casual elegance and a chuckle.

"Maybe I should take her," he mused. "Show the wizarding world what's really inside an Auror –"

His voice was cut off. Not by an inhuman scream or a curse or an explosion, but by a new... sound.

It was impossibly loud, and impossibly deep. It was barely audible, but she could feel the vibration in every broken bone – it was a sound that broke stone apart. She could see cracks forming in the floor, the walls and ceiling shuddering and showering them with more dust...

And then she saw something that she knew would haunt her nightmares for the rest of her life.

Harry was floating above the floor, across the hall from Voldemort. He hung suspended in mid-air, like a puppet held by invisible strings. His limbs lolled without feeling, thrashing seemingly at random as he floated on the tremor of the sound, his skin utterly pallid, his eyes half-closed like he was daydreaming...

Dumbledore's eyes widened. Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

And then Harry's eyes snapped wide open, and it came.

She didn't know how to describe it. It sprayed from Harry's mouth, translucent yet dripping with ichor of a million colours. It glowed, but

not in the way anything should glow, with even consistency and colour. This was patchy and spastic and wrong. It didn't even move like anything she had seen before – it didn't flow like a liquid or gas, or writhe like a tentacle, or jump from place to place like lightning.

No, it was simply in a place in an instant, and then a second later, it was somewhere else, and nobody could tell how it got there, except that it didn't belong there.

It didn't belong anywhere. It was arrhythmic, discordant, utter irradiance. No pattern, no path, no purpose that she could discern, and none that she would want to think about.

. And then it touched Voldemort, and he screamed. She could see it clawing at his skin, tearing big translucent patches outwards, hungrily seeking to claw him in like the maw of a starving nightmare...

And then everything went white-hot.

She awoke in pain, blinking slowly as she shook blood away from her nose.

Everything – from witch and wizard to dragon – in the room was unconscious – and Voldemort and the Death Eaters were gone. She took a shuddering breath and immediately regretted it as she felt something sharp digging into her lungs...

Harry...

Every movement was sheer agony, but she needed to get to him. She could see him, sprawled on the floor, not that far away. She just needed to get to him, hold his hand, make sure he was okay, make sure everything she hadn't seen wasn't just a giant nightmare...

She reached him, and she couldn't believe her eyes.

Harry was unharmed, breathing softly as he slept on the floor. His robes were filthy, but there wasn't a sign of a wound on him. His wand was curled in his hand, and even his glasses sparkled.

"Harry..." she gasped, shaking him as much as she could before her arms seized up with pain. "Wake up... wake up, please..."

His eyes fluttered – and opened.

"Tonks," he whispered. "I'm here."

"What was..."

"Shh... sleep." She felt his arms fold around her. "Not much longer... let me have this just for a little longer... you're safe though, Tonks, you're safe..."

Tonks exhaled softly, and passed out.

He had heard the sound, but he hadn't left his spot.

He had heard Voldemort scream, but he hadn't left his position, now with both feet resting solidly on the floor – the magic suspending them above the machinery had finally failed entirely.

He had even seen the brilliant flash of white light, and he had shielded his eyes – but when it had passed, he was still standing.

He had survived.

Nathan Cassane breathed, and ran a hand through his hair as he sat down on the stairs, surrounded by shattered glass.

"I failed you, Cassie."

"No, you didn't."

His eyes snapped up – no, it wasn't possible, he had stayed behind –

Antonin Dolohov gave him a frank look as he stepped over a broken device. "Are you honestly surprised?"

Nathan blinked twice – and then gestured for the other man to sit down. "No, not really. Your master won't be pleased."

"Fuck him," Antonin said roughly, sitting opposite Nathan on a broken boulder. "I'm not here for him – no, that's not it, I've never been doing all this for him."

"You want revenge..."

"And I haven't gotten it yet," Antonin said grimly. "Until then, I'm a Death Eater – whatever that means. After that, though..."

He ran a hand through his long, ragged hair. "You know, I told you this would happen. I told you'd serve him. That day, when I gave Phoebe a way away from the pain, sent her to her mum... I told you, Nathan." He sighed. "But you didn't save yourself, Nathan. You could have... you could have moved on. You had the world at your feet, and even with everything closing in, you could have gotten something. The world already hated me when I fell." He looked up at Nathan. "It didn't hate you."

"I failed her, Antonin..." Nathan whispered brokenly. "I failed Cassie and Phoebe –"

"There wasn't any test to fail, Nathan," Antonin whispered. "The only test you set was your own. But you still love them, right?"

"Now and for always."

Antonin closed his eyes. "Then they'll be waiting for you. You know that as well as I."

Nathan blinked. "You... you think –"

"Yes," Antonin replied steadily, his eyes still closed. "I bet if you listened hard enough, you could hear them through that veil."

He could hear them. He had heard them from the very first instance he had stepped in the room – and it was the sound that had always given him desperate hope. A hope that he could claw them back, give them new bodies, a new life...

"But why," he murmured, "do I keep trying to bring them here... when I can just go there?"

Antonin nodded. "It's an option."

He rose to his feet and looked at the archway. Somehow, despite the wreckage of machinery all around them, it had remained standing – the gate to a place of which he knew nothing, and yet where they were waiting...

"I'm afraid, Antonin."

"People fear death because they don't know what's coming," Antonin said quietly, getting up, ascending the stairs, and placing a scarred hand on his old friend's shoulder. "But... but you know, don't you? You know who's waiting."

"I do," Nathan whispered, his eyes shimmering with tears. "I can hear Cassandra and Phoebe, Antonin. And I can hear Dorcas and Carson and the Vunerens and James and Lily and... and Regina's there too." He looked at Antonin. "They've been waiting."

Antonin blinked. "Goddamn it... something in my eye..."

"Will you be okay?"

Somehow, Antonin gave him a wry smile. "Well, can I say I killed you? It would do wonders for my reputation."

Nathan chuckled. "You didn't earn it."

"Since when has that stopped me?"

They laughed at that, and then Antonin took a deep breath.

"Nathan?"

"Yeah?"

"If you see Regina..." Antonin swallowed hard. "Just tell her... just tell her I'm coming. I won't be long."

"I will," Nathan whispered. He turned to face the archway and the veil.

"I'm coming home."

uthor's Note: well, this is the end. The epilogue. When I started this fic over three years ago, I never thought it would balloon the way it has. Over half a million words, a plot worthy of Xanatos, and hopefully some characters that managed to tug your flinty and jaded heartstrings. As the guy who's been responsible for this thing... yeah, it's been wild.

Just a few things before I step away. Firstly, I'd like to thank my beta readers who have been helping me since the beginning. Mindless, Seratin, Amerision, Riley Poole, Vash, Blaise, and Virail - you've been great, guys, and I've really valued your input. Secondly, I'd like to thank my readers at the DarkLordPotter forums. Yeah, the criticism is harsh and brutal and nobody there holds back, but it's the best damn site for quality Harry Potter fanfiction online, and they helped make me a better writer. Justly deserved kudos to them.

And finally, I'd like to thank all my readers here, particularly those of you who have bothered to drop reviews of any quality. For those of you who have been reading since the beginning, your support has been awesome - I can't imagine what it's been like trying to follow this story over an extended period of time. Hopefully, that problem will be alleviated when I start publishing in the sequel.

Oh yeah, it's happening. Can't give you an exact date when it's coming, but it IS coming.

So here it is. The epilogue to 'Renegade Cause'. No warnings this time. Thanks for reading, reviewing, and enjoying - it's been a trip.

-Silens

It was two weeks after what some were calling the 'Ministry Incident', namely to differentiate it from the bombing in November. But unlike that attack, the repairs had been markedly easier to complete – albeit extraction of the dragon had proven difficult.

The proof was undeniable now. Unconscious and injured Death Eaters had been left behind in the Department of Mysteries, and while none of them had given Lord Voldemort's name, collaborative testimony was hard to ignore. And with enough members of the

International Confederation of Wizards still in Bonaccord Hall, it hadn't been difficult for an old Headmaster to wrangle enough time to deliver a speech restating the truth.

Harry couldn't help but let a wry little smile slide onto his face as he sat behind the table, facing the door. It was a small backroom in the Three Broomsticks (Aberforth had outright refused any further meetings of any kind to be held in his bar), but it was surprisingly well-appointed. The walls were stone, but it was carved and smooth and well-set. The furnishings were rich, but not too rich, and the single tall window was rimmed with a final spray of frost, already melting under the sun.

Spring was coming to Hogsmeade. If he listened hard, he could hear students laughing and drinking in the pub outside on the long-overdue Hogsmeade visit – the perfect cover for Harry to have a few very important meetings.

He looked from the window to Dumbledore, who was standing at the side of the table, peering at Harry over his spectacles.

"Are you quite sure you do not want me here?"

Harry winced. "It's not like that, Professor, it's just..." He searched his mind for the words he needed. "It's probably better he doesn't see you here. It's just a few things he and I need to settle up."

Dumbledore nodded. "Fair enough. Good luck." He opened the door, and immediately smiled. "Come in, Rufus – oh, and I must say, congratulations on the nomination."

"Thank you," Rufus Scrimgeour replied stiffly, limping into the room and eyeing Harry suspiciously – some things never changed. "Is it enchanted?"

"I did the work myself," Dumbledore replied. "Now, if you would excuse me, Rosmerta has just untapped a new barrel, and it has been quite some time since I have had the chance to savour a drink with my students."

Harry's mouth dropped open with astonishment, and Scrimgeour looked as if he wanted to say something, but Dumbledore simply smiled and strode towards the taproom, closing the door behind him.

"Crazy wingnut," Scrimgeour muttered, dropping into the chair opposite Harry.

"Nice to see you too," Harry replied, scratching his chin as he eyed the Auror. "So I guess you got what you wanted."

Scrimgeour grunted. "Yeah, fighting out the race for Minister against a slew of idiots and Death Eater sympathizers. Even with Dumbledore's backing, it won't be an easy fight."

"And mine," Harry added, his eyes narrowing. "We made a bargain I'd support you, and I plan to hold to that."

"Glad to see you remembered something of our negotiations," Scrimgeour said coldly, reaching into a pocket of his robes and pulling free a thick folder filled with papers and parchment.

"What's that?"

"Dmitri Kemester's file," Scrimgeour replied with disgust, holding the stack the same way one would hold a mouldy sandwich. "I had a few people put it together, and since, for all intents and purposes, he's dead –"

"You have proof of that?" Harry asked sharply. "I mean, we've seen before –"

"He leapt straight into a building that was engulfed in Fiendfyre, and nobody saw him leave," Scrimgeour retorted, tossing the file onto the table with an audible thud. "If he got out of that... you know what, no, he didn't get out of that. The funeral's been held, the grave's been placed, the man is dead. And considering nobody knows what to do with his file –"

"Aren't you going to keep it on record..." Harry's voice trailed off as he saw the steely look in Scrimgeour's golden eyes. "Ah."

"There are enough paranoid rambling, wild hysterics, and insane conspiracy theories in that mess that would fill a year's worth of Quibblers," Scrimgeour said darkly, "but even then, the stuff that is actually true is..." He cleared his throat loudly. "Well, suffice to say, it's better we don't have it, even in deep storage."

"So, you're giving it to me?" Harry asked disbelievingly. "One of the few people who could probably go through all of this and find the truth —"

"And considering so much of it is directly tied to you, it's just one more way of ensuring it never sees the light of day," Scrimgeour replied, a smug smirk growing on his face. "Enjoy."

"You know that I could just give this to the Prophet and see how it all pans out," Harry said, his teeth gritted.

"You could," Scrimgeour said, reaching into his robes again, this time pulling out a fresh copy of the paper and tossing it onto the file. "But the new editor's just been announced, and rest assured, she's the kind to not skimp on the details."

Harry eyed the headline, and a bad feeling began to grow in his stomach. "Are you... 'Rita Skeeter Named Head Editor'... oh, for the love of..."

"Believe me, I'm just as angry about this as you are," Scrimgeour spat, his eyes flashing as he picked up the paper. "The Prophet in the hands of that witch isn't about to cooperate with anybody, and she's not one to cover anything up."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Harry said coolly, throwing the words out like a challenge. "Maybe the Ministry shouldn't be keeping secrets."

"A wonderful dream," Scrimgeour said curtly, rising to his feet, "but dreams burn away on contact with reality. And one more thing, regarding Kemester."

Harry sighed tiredly. "What?"

"There has been pressure placed upon the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Scrimgeour said slowly, not taking his eyes off Harry, "that the man receives a posthumous commendation for his services to the Ministry. Order of Merlin, Third Class."

Harry's eyes snapped up. "Are you... are you fucking serious?"

"I'm not lying."

"Who's placing this 'pressure'?" Harry demanded, getting up. "Who wants this?"

"Besides the new Head Editor of the Daily Prophet, a number of delegates of the International Confederation of Wizards and Hit Wizards, and a fair number of Aurors?" Scrimgeour snorted. "Certainly not me. I read through his file, I know what he did. But enough people saw his stands as 'admirable', in their own way."

"And you're telling me this because..."

Scrimgeour shrugged. "Figured you should know. I read the file, I know your history with the man."

Harry walked towards the window and wiped away some frost. He could see a group of third-years laughing and running in the slush, not a care in their minds. Not a care in the world.

"I don't think I can ever forgive the man," he finally said, glancing back at Scrimgeour. "But from what I know, and from what I've seen, and from what I've been told... I get it. I understand him. I really wish I didn't, but I get the desperation, the drive for vengeance, the paranoia and anger and..."

He shook his head. "Nobody needed him. He wasn't essential, he wasn't special, he wasn't even that much of a hero. Sure, he saved Tonks' life, but it wasn't because he cared about her or anyone else... he was just doing his own thing, following his own brand of law, and he didn't care who or what stood in his way. Did he represent anything that people might admire or respect? Sure, but is that

enough? Is that worth everything he did?" He gave Scrimgeour a sceptical look. "I dunno, does the Ministry give out awards to people like that?"

"Depends," Scrimgeour replied grimly. "For him... well, it would be up the committee."

"You know what?" Harry sighed, and raked a hand through his unruly black hair. "I just don't... I just don't fucking care. I don't, I really don't. About Kemester, about any of that. He's gone, he's dead, it's over."

"Just on that topic," Scrimgeour said, his eyes still fixed on Harry, studying every reaction, "I can inform you that the Department is calling off the search for Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, who were seen fleeing the crime scene the same night Kemester vanished."

Harry immediately fought to keep any emotions tightly hidden. "I... okay, why?"

"Because while Black is a criminal, and Lupin is undoubtedly an accomplice," Scrimgeour growled, "neither of them are Death Eaters, and according to my sources, neither of them are currently in the country. Both were last seen flying east on Black's motorbike over the water, towards the mainland." His eyes hardened, to the point where they resembled nothing less than speckled cat's eye agates behind a pair of spectacles. "And given what's inevitably coming, and given the state of the current Auror Office after the past few months... we can't afford to waste people chasing them."

The scowl vanished for a few seconds as the old Auror gave a bitter smirk. "And besides, Black was responsible for Barnabus Cuffe's death – I think I can give him this one."

Harry eyed the old Auror with distaste. "You haven't changed."

"Most people don't, Potter," Scrimgeour said curtly. "You can call me avaricious and utterly corrupt, you can call me neurotic and paranoid, you can call me every insult you can dream up – the fact is that I'm consistent, and I hate Voldemort just as much as you do. And now that things are out in the open, that's the sort of person the Ministry

needs right now." He chuckled as he slid open the door. "But then again, you're already supporting it. See you on the trail, Potter."

He slammed the door shut behind him, leaving Harry with his thoughts.

"You're late."

Antonin Dolohov snorted. "I didn't know you cared, Bella."

"He's been waiting for you for days," Bellatrix snarled, slamming her open palm against the table as Dolohov hung up his cloak. "Days, Dolohov! Where have you been?"

"Setting some affairs in order," Dolohov replied stiffly, primly adjusting his sleeve and eyeing his newly trimmed goatee in the mirror. "Can't a Death Eater take a vacation?"

Bellatrix's eyes bulged. "Vacation?"

"Easy, I was joking," Dolohov said hastily, raising his hands as he fixed his collar in the mirror. "Where's the Dark Lord?"

"Library, down the hall," Bellatrix hissed, crossing her arms over her chest as she stalked behind him. "The Dark Lord is displeased."

"I really don't know why," Dolohov remarked sardonically, "considering one of his biggest obstacles is dead, thanks to yours truly. Sure, not everything worked out according to the plan, but —"

"He doesn't trust you."

Dolohov snorted. "Considering everything's that's happened, I'd be astounded if he did."

They reached the double cherry doors, and he glanced back at Bellatrix. "You can go elsewhere, Bellatrix, I'm fully capable of opening a door."

She glared daggers at him, but spun on her heel and stormed away. Don't envy the poor bastard who gets her way, Dolohov mused, scratching his chin as he knocked on the door.

"Enter."

He took a steadying breath, and pulled open the door, bowing deeply as he shut it behind him. "My Lord."

When he looked up, and saw him, his gut nearly leapt in his chest.

Lord Voldemort was sitting in a high-backed armchair, his desk piled with thick, leather-bound volumes. Several of them rustled with hidden blades within the covers, and it even seemed as if one book was actively bleeding onto the table.

But Voldemort wasn't reading. His wand was in his hand, and he was touching his own arm with it, thoughtfully prodding a long translucent mass that was partially extruding from his forearm and was in the rough shape of a hand...

"You see my... dilemma."

Dolohov struggled for words. He had heard the voice in two places. One was from the figure sitting calmly opposite him, toying with something Dolohov really didn't want identified.

The other, louder voice was in his head.

"It seems," Voldemort mused, "that Potter's attack has struck in a way I hadn't thought possible, partially severing the ties between my spirit and my physical form... really quite perplexing, when one thinks about it."

Yeah, perplexing was the word I was thinking, Dolohov thought queasily. Not creepy as all fuck and really, really disturbing, just... 'perplexing'.

"I'm sure you will find new ways to optimize this new opportunity, my Lord," he replied diplomatically, sincerely hoping that the Dark Lord's

new ability to speak into his head didn't give him the power to read thoughts either. "I have news."

"Nathan Cassane is dead," Voldemort said, still not deigning to look at Dolohov. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"By your hand?"

Dolohov shrugged. "Sure, let's call it that."

"He was an annoyance for far too long," Voldemort said curtly, "but he served his purpose. A shame, though, that I could not co-opt his scheme..."

Yeah, a shame, Dolohov thought, shivering despite himself. "So, my Lord, what is our next step... considering the failure at the Department of Mysteries..."

"Far from a failure, Dolohov," Voldemort said sharply, looking up and fixing him with a red-eyed stare. "Despite the foiling of my primary plans and Potter's... episode, I did have a tertiary plan. Do you see the clear vial on my desk?"

Dolohov saw it. It was little more than a common potion vial, filled with an unremarkable clear liquid. "I do, my Lord."

"I had Rookwood retrieve it and a highly interesting volume from the storage lockers of the Department of Mysteries," Voldemort said, a cold smile growing on his face. "Rest assured, while our organization recuperates, we will be very busy indeed."

"May I ask..."

"Not at this time, Dolohov," Voldemort replied. "For you see, you will not be working with me on this."

"My Lord?"

Voldemort adjusted his grip on his wand and gave it a quick wave. Immediately, a sheaf of parchment slid across the table into Dolohov's hand.

He read it quickly, and struggled to keep his face free of emotion. So we're doing it this way... not my preference, but ultimately...

"Is the mission to your satisfaction?"

Dolohov eyed his orders, and then glanced up to look at the monster sitting across from him.

"It will be done, my Lord."

Harry folded his hands and eyed the girl standing opposite him.

"I didn't expect you to show up. I'm surprised they let you out of the Hospital Wing?"

Su Li glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. She still hadn't said a word, but Harry was rapidly getting used to that. It didn't make the habit any less frustrating, though.

"So what do you want?"

She sat down instead of giving an answer, still glaring at Harry through her dark, mirror-like eyes. Despite himself, Harry felt a twinge of unease.

"Is this about the simulamancy?" he asked slowly. "Because you know with you, I'm not going to use it –"

Her exasperated expression told him everything he needed about that response. Of course she knew he wasn't going to use her as a simulacrum – that wasn't the reason why she was here.

"Is this about..." He lowered his voice barely above a whisper. "Peeves?"

She picked up her bag next to her chair, and withdrew a quill, an inkpot, and a crumpled piece of paper, dropping all of them on the table with brisk intensity.

"What's all this?"

She shoved the quill towards his hand, and he cautiously picked it up. What in the hell...

"So what am I supposed to do with this?"

She rolled her eyes again, and gestured at the inkpot. Harry cautiously wet the quill tip and then glanced back at Su.

"Now what?"

She slowly tapped the top of her eyebrow and then flicked her finger downwards.

She wants me to close my eyes, Harry thought. He shut his eyes and set his quill on the parchment, trying to calm his fraying nerves...

His arm jerked. He let out a startled yelp, but his arm was still jerking, scrawling across the parchment of its own accord, scribbling as fast as it could...

His eyes snapped open, and he saw nine words, scrawled in sloppy block capitals, the ink running together in rivulets.

I'M HERE. I'LL BE GOOD AND QUIET... FOR NOW.

"Son of a bitch," Harry swore, looking up at Su, unable to stop his heart from wildly pounding. "Fuck, you knew –"

She gave him a hard, steady glance as she tugged the quill and parchment out of his hand and hastily scribbled a message of her own. A few moments later, she shoved the parchment back into his hands.

you have ultimate control unless you choose to cede it. he is nothing more than a tool to be used for good or evil. the tool only has power in the hands of the wielder.

"And what about you?" Harry asked darkly, sliding the parchment back towards her. "What's your role in all of this?"

For the first time, Harry saw a pallid smile creep onto Su Li's face as she wrote five more words.

i am the gatekeeper's mask

"What the... what does that – hey, where are you –"

She didn't answer. She only slammed the door behind her.

It was raining in the graveyard.

Enchanted so that no Muggle could see the tombstones, the graveyard was small, quiet, and ignored. Not many people were buried here – most families had their own plots where they had their funerals, graveyards of esteem, worthy of remembrance.

This place wasn't like that – it didn't need to be. This was a place where the Ministry quietly buried its dead, those with no family to claim – and then promptly forgot about them.

Her shoes sank a fraction of an inch in the muddy ground, and she scowled as she trudged towards the newest grave. There weren't many flowers on these graves – only a few token blossoms, scattered by a bored groundskeeper stopping by whenever he didn't have anything better to do.

She stopped at the newest grave, in the very corner of the graveyard. The tombstone was cheap granite, with no ornamentation or exquisite carving. It was simple, token, chosen for utility.

"Dmitri Kemester'," she read aloud, "'Born April 19, 1966, Died February 27, 1996. Hit Wizard.'" She sniffed. "Not even a quote or a phrase, Dmitri... yeah, that's just like you."

She reached into her coat and pulled three flowers free. She had carefully wrapped and preserved them, so that the blossoms hadn't broken, and would never break.

"One petunia," she whispered, "one snapdragon... and one nightshade." She shook her head as she laid the flowers at the foot of the grave, freezing them in place with a prod of her wand. "Yeah, I know it's corny and not very typical, but you'd get the irony..."

She closed her eyes and forced back the strange emotions churning in her gut. She was professional, she wasn't supposed to feel anything for him, particularly considering he had been an ugly, callous, rude asshole of a Hit Wizard...

"And yet you saved my life," she murmured, "and you cared enough... cared more than anyone else did. Guess that's why I'm here – why I'm the only one here..."

She straightened. "You just wanted the truth... just like me."

She wiped a smear of rain from her gem-lined glasses and set her jaw. "I might not be a Hit Wizard, but I want the truth, and I don't care how ugly it is. Good luck wherever you might have gone, Dmitri Kemester – your work will live on."

And with that, Rita Skeeter turned on her heel and left the graveyard.

"Did Scrimgeour leave?"

"He returned to the Ministry, yes," Dumbledore said calmly, closing the door behind him as he looked with concern at Harry. "Were there any problems?"

Harry sighed shakily. He didn't want to mention Su's visit – he still didn't understand it, and he knew he didn't want to bring up Peeves. "Nothing that I didn't expect." He stepped away from the frosty window and returned to his chair. "So I guess now... well, at least Hogwarts is safe. The time dilation is gone."

"Outside of those peculiar boulders hovering around the Astronomy Tower and surprising most of our owls, I would agree with you," Dumbledore said, drawing his wand and conjuring a squashy-looking armchair out of nowhere, where he promptly sat. "I do not think we will be getting rid of those however; they really do add a magical ambiance to the castle that I find rather charming."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle a bit at that. "But what about the tomb, what are we going to do about that?"

Dumbledore frowned. "Well – and you will find this interesting, Harry – but I sought to examine it more closely, so I went down to the dungeons two days after the incident at the Ministry. But the funniest thing happened." He idly scratched his beard. "I could not find it."

Harry's eyes widened. "You're kidding me."

"I would not kid about this," Dumbledore replied, his frown deepening. "I searched the entire dungeons, and I could not find the entrance at all. In fact, where we had blasted our way in before, there was nothing but a blank wall, and even when I attempted to blast my way in again, all I found was stone and dirt. But then again, perhaps that is not a bad thing."

"You think the castle itself is trying to send us a message?" Harry guessed. "Maybe moving it out of our reach forever, considering the damage we did?"

"An interesting hypothesis," Dumbledore said lightly, tapping his chin, "and it could very well be the truth, but it was an infinitely fascinating place, Harry. Outside of natural time and space, the experiments that we could have done, everything we could have learned about what we know about life..."

The Headmaster sighed. "Alas, it is not to be, and despite the time dilation being gone, we still have little time to spare." He eyed Harry seriously. "Now, I have not mentioned this before, all things considered, but you have neglected your education this year."

Harry shifted uncomfortably under the Headmaster's intense gaze. "Well... okay, but I had good reason –"

"I'm not denying that," Dumbledore replied, "but it is a fact. Fortunately for you, the time acceleration has thrown the entire Hogwarts curriculum off-schedule, and particularly considering this is your O.W.L. year..."

Harry winced. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"You do not have to apologize, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly. "I have spoken to the Ministry regarding this, and they have agreed that in the next three-to-four months leading up to the O.W.L.s, providing classes are attended, they will revise the content to reflect a more compact curriculum." He gave Harry a stern look. "But that means you will have to attend classes again, no exceptions."

"But Scrimgeour wants me to help with his campaign," Harry protested, "and what about Voldemort? Even if we're right in thinking he's going to lie low for a bit and recoup his losses, he's going to start things again!"

Dumbledore frowned. "Hmm... well, that does seem to be a bit of a conundrum." He eyed Harry speculatively. "If there was only a bit of magic that would allow someone to be in two places at once, to assume an entirely different identity with uncanny accuracy..."

"You're talking about simulamancy!"

"An easy secret to keep, Harry," Dumbledore said with a wink. "I can simply tell Madam Pomfrey you are suffering from a mild form of narcolepsy, and she will understand."

"On the topic of secrets," Harry began, lowering his voice, "Scrimgeour told me that the Auror Office was calling off the investigation for Sirius and Lupin –"

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said, his smile fading. "Not precisely a declaration of innocence, but then again, neither of them are quite innocent."

"Have you heard from either of them? Are they okay?"

"They have left the country," Dumbledore said steadily, "and are heading east. I have given them a new mission, as a matter of fact."

"Can you tell me?" Harry asked eagerly.

"They are heading for old vampire country." Dumbledore's eyes darkened as he glanced out the window. "There are three girls still lying comatose the Hospital Wing because of vampire blood magic, and that is unacceptable to me on every level. They will be hunting for a cure."

"Do you think they'll find something?"

"If they do, they will have a great challenge to retrieve it," Dumbledore replied grimly. "It is a cliché that vampires do not get along with werewolves, but it is a cliché based upon fact and a long, bloody history. It will not be easy."

Harry sighed. "You know... you know, as bad as that sounds, I kind of wish I was with them. It sounds like a great adventure."

"It does," Dumbledore said with a nod. "Also, I think you should know that due to some... complications, Miss Delacour's work visa has been revoked."

Harry snapped up. "What? She's being sent back to France?"

"Yes, and for her own safety," Dumbledore replied calmly. "Between her entanglements with the goblins and her workings with Cassane, she would become a target here."

Harry groaned. "Well... well, I guess that makes sense, but that's just one more person I can't rely on."

"I understand the feeling, Harry." Dumbledore gave him a very frank expression. "I lost someone I relied upon dearly this term."

"You're talking about Snape," Harry said bitterly. "And... look, Professor, I'm sorry, but I really don't care that he's gone. He may have been close to my mum at one point, and he might have been a great spy, but after what he did to Lupin –"

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore said sternly, "and yes, his absence will be missed. I trusted Severus Snape, if only because I knew that his loyalty to your mother also led – rather circumspectly – back to you. I cannot explain or even justify all of his actions, but I do understand his motivations, and I know that despite his personal compunctions, he would never have turned against us. He was an ally – although I can and will admit there were times where his cooperation was... less than optimal."

"Understatement of the century," Harry muttered. "So who's going to teach Potions since he's gone?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I am."

"What?"

"I am currently having a great deal of difficulty finding a Professor to step in and teach the course for next year," Dumbledore said, leaning back a bit in his chair, "and on such short notice, it is quite impossible to procure a qualified Potions instructor, so for the next few months, I will step in and provide lectures." He eyed Harry seriously. "I do hope the teaching experience is up to your standards."

Harry chuckled. "Professor, it'll probably be the best Potions class I'll ever have. I'm guessing Professor Moody's staying for Defense Against The Dark Arts."

"He insisted upon it," Dumbledore said, chuckling a bit himself. "Granted, I suspect he will be forced to return in some capacity to the Auror Office once the year concludes – which will leave me to find two Professors – but for now he is staying."

"That's good," Harry said quietly. "He's really good... learned a lot from him."

He took a deep breath – even though he really, really didn't want to talk about it, he knew he had to say something. "Professor... about Hermione..."

Dumbledore's smile immediately faded. "Harry, you do know it was not your fault –"

"I know, I know," Harry said hastily. "I'm just concerned... you know, what's going to happen with her..."

"I spoke to her parents," Dumbledore said quietly, "and I explained the situation. I did not mention your involvement, simply described to them the import of the attack and the... aftermath of said attack. Both of them are medical professionals, and they have agreed to a new course of action."

"Which is..."

"Miss Granger will not return to Hogwarts this term," Dumbledore said, his voice filled with surprising sadness. "She will be participating in a lengthy series of counselling and therapy sessions at St. Mungo's, and I have prepared a detailed set of lectures and material for her to study for her O.W.L.s. Furthermore, in addition to the protections surrounding the Granger residence, she will receive limited memory augmentation that will allow her, if desired, to forget details of the events that transpired a few weeks ago."

"And she's agreed?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. "There is no easy way to deal with this, Harry, and I can only hope this will be enough to enable her to return to Hogwarts next September."

"I hope she can." Harry put a hand to his forehead. "It's not fair..."

"Lord Voldemort does not play fair," Dumbledore replied, his eyes flashing. "Of that, we are certain."

"Professor..." Harry took a deep breath.

"Yes, Harry?"

"I know about the Memory Charms." He exhaled slowly. "When Voldemort used the Killing Curse on me... well, I broke them."

"Can you forgive me, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, his voice very quiet. "For enabling such things?"

"What, are you... there's nothing to forgive, Professor," Harry said, raking a hand through his hair. "I asked for them... and as much as I know they contributed to the way things turned out, I don't regret it either." He sighed. "I mean, I can't say it's good that I remember it all now, but it's better I know about it. And now that the connection is gone for good –"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Are you quite certain of that, Harry?"

"Oh yeah," Harry said, scratching his temple. "Oh, I'm sure. Voldemort's curse did a number of destroying that."

He knew it was a lie, but Dumbledore didn't need to know the whole truth about that. Not yet... not until he fully knew what it all had meant...

"It is not a connection I would have ever used lightly," Dumbledore murmured, "so I hold no regrets that it is destroyed. You are absolutely certain, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I'm sure. Do you... do you think it fulfills the prophecy?"

It was a question for which it seemed that Dumbledore didn't have a clear answer. "I will be honest with you, Harry," he said finally after a few seconds of deep thought, "I am really not sure. I do not suspect that it is fulfilled – namely due to the fact that you are not dead."

"Figures," Harry muttered. "Guess I still have to kill him... damn it..."

"Harry, you now know you have the capacity to kill him," Dumbledore said steadily, taking Harry's hand in his own. "But I also know that

you have something he does not, something he will never have. Something that will always control that capacity to violence and death you possess, a control that Voldemort has never had. You have seen the face of Death, and you know what it means – in a way, it's not unknown to you."

"It's not as scary anymore," Harry whispered. "You see so much of it... but I know that whatever comes after can't be that bad..."

"A very mature and very wise attitude to take, Harry," Dumbledore said with a nod of approval. "Most, as I know you saw, never quite realize that. They grow attached to life, for it's all they know, instead of accepting the inevitability of passing onto a new path, a new adventure."

"Cassane."

"I think, at the very end, he knew," Dumbledore said softly. "I hope he knew." He slowly rose to his feet. "But even still, Harry, I am incredibly proud of you."

"One more thing."

He could see Dumbledore close his eyes. "Yes."

"Tonks."

The old wizard blinked twice, very quickly. "Yes."

"I know you.... I know you did something." Harry swallowed back the lump in his throat. "And I know why, too."

"I have only ever worked to help you, Harry."

"I know that, and I can't say how much I appreciated it." Harry swallowed hard. "But... but it needs to stop." A sudden rush of fear surged into his gut. "You can stop it, right –"

"I can," Dumbledore said. "Are you certain you want this?"

"This isn't about me," Harry said tiredly. "It's about her. It's... it's not right. I mean... I mean, somewhere deep down, even from the very beginning, it was unbelievable –"

"But it wouldn't have worked at all," Dumbledore said, "if there hadn't been the capacity for something there."

The lump in Harry's throat got bigger. "You... you mean the magic?"

"Magic isn't everything, Harry." Dumbledore turned and looked at Harry. "Particularly when it comes to us."

He found the letter on his desk when he returned to the office.

Dumbledore glanced up at the portraits lining the walls of the room. "Did you happen to see the owl that delivered this?"

"Big black bird," Phineas Black said stiffly with a huff of distaste. "Ugly looking thing, but clearly one that's used to flying long distances."

"Of course," Dumbledore murmured, and Fawkes let out a mournful trill as he slit the envelope open and began to read.

Professor Dumbledore,

As I am sure you are aware at this point, I have left the country. I will not tell you where I have travelled – mostly because it is of no concern, but also because in the chance that this letter is intercepted, I do not want to have to deal with unpleasant visitors.

This message has also been sent with full knowledge that you have returned to public office, likely resuming the position of Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. I did not wish to send a message sooner, based upon the assumptions that you had returned, due to concerns mentioned above.

It is not an easy thing to write this letter to you, given our professional relationship over the past several years. It is not a relationship I am fond of, or one that I feel has given my life any greater meaning or

purpose. But I cannot say that such a relationship was without benefit, so I thank you for the opportunities such a relationship afforded me.

I do not apologize for my approach to education or methodologies, on a side note. While I am aware that such methods may have deemed me a poor, sub-standard educator, I do not regret my teaching, for it rewarded and challenged those who sought excellence and mercilessly punished the stupid and incompetent.

I can imagine at this point you have grasped the reason behind my departure from your service and this final 'parting of the ways', as you would likely deem it. You are a highly intelligent individual, after all, and I'm certain at this point that you have put together all the requisite pieces.

But for my own conscience's sake, I feel it necessary that I elucidate my rationale, if only to put in writing my justification.

Simply put, my focus over the past several years has been unhealthy towards my intellectual and emotional development. While I do not pretend to deny the power of my emotional connections to those in my past, I believe that such connections were exploited, and furthermore, that I allowed said connections to be exploited, namely by you.

But I must ask the question of whether to place any degree of grudge or blame, and thus ponder whether I would have done the same had our positions be reversed. Do I regret your usage of my emotions to control or manipulate me towards your ends? Perhaps.

Would have I done the same?

I already have.

Yes, in the manipulations of your pet werewolf to deliver my final warnings to Potter and his band, I have come to realize that perhaps we are not so different in our methods. In forcing Lupin to become the method of ending my strange vendetta with Potter and Black, I have subsumed a position you once held and adopted it for my own gain.

Do I feel guilt for such a choice? Perhaps – it is not an enjoyable thing to toy with the passions and emotions of others, for one must toss aside the reasonable restrictions of logic and replace them with the insubstantial and unpredictable methods of controlling people. And in realizing this, I know that you took no joy in my suffering, simply using it to complete necessary tasks.

But that time is passed. I have looked into the Mirror of Erised and found myself wanting, in most part of my own doing. I have limited myself and my experiences by continuing to hold onto a shred of lost emotion, only reciprocated in my most desperate dreams. And as you yourself have said, 'it does not do well to dwell on dreams, and forget to live.'

Too long have I dwelt on a fool's dream. I have not lived.

So you must inevitably ask, does this mean he has forsaken that love entirely, and chosen a different path?

...it is at this point that uncertainty remains, for it is very difficult to surrender such a fragile thread to which I have held for so very long.

So I have left. Many, I know, will deem me as a coward, running from the Dark Lord's horde and away from your light, seeking a lonely path in the outside world where there is neither victory nor defeat. It is a treasonous, shameful thing that I have done by leaving, and I am more aware of this than any.

But I will not return. In my eyes, I have fulfilled my duty, paid my dues, and now I must walk as a free man. Do not attempt to find me – there are six billion people on this planet, and even with the aid of magic, it is not worth your time to find a man who simply wishes to be left alone, who does not wish to be found. I wish you the best of luck against the forces of the Dark Lord – trust me when I say you will need it.

But then again, you have Potter. He is thoroughly mediocre in every way, insufferably arrogant, and infernally convinced of his own righteousness beyond any other – but I will admit the necessary growth forced of him this year has been modestly commendable. If he

continues on that path, he may indeed be worthy of the blood his mother sacrificed.

Do I regret this choice?

Regret is a reflection of a past that becomes all the more meaningless with the passage of time. I know what have the capacity to save, and what I have chosen to save.

I have saved myself – and for me, that is enough.

Regards,

Severus Snape

Postscript – Liar's Heartstone is both less and more than it appears. In the end, it stands as a resounding testament of the fact that most of humanity is beneath contempt.

Dumbledore looked up from the letter and glanced at Fawkes. The phoenix let out a long, mournful cry.

"A shame, yes," Dumbledore murmured, "but in end, it is a victory nonetheless."

"I've got to admit," Harry began, taking a deep breath, "I'm a little surprised you're here."

Tonks snorted as she dropped into the squashy armchair that Dumbledore had left behind. "Really?"

"Well, maybe not," Harry said ruefully. "I'm glad you're here, though. How are you feeling?"

Tonks winced and gestured down at her legs. "Well, they set all the bones properly and fixed up the internal bleeding in the right spots, but man, that's not a fun procedure, I can tell you that."

"I bet," Harry said sympathetically. "I mean, I've gone through it with Quidditch. At least you're only getting bones fixed, not regrown."

"True enough," Tonks conceded. "Doesn't help, though, that the next couple weeks aren't going to be fun at the Auror Office."

"I thought Scrimgeour's running for Minister, he's not going to cause problems –"

"He read through all of Kemester's file," Tonks said bitterly, "and guess who was the other person in that file besides you who Kemester nailed?"

"Do you think..."

"I should be fine," Tonks said lightly, but Harry could hear the nervousness in her voice. "The worst Scrimgeour'll throw at me are some misdemeanour charges and probably a demotion or two. He can't afford to throw away any Aurors, now that the war's started."

"I can talk to him –"

"Don't bother." Her hair went lank and mousy-brown as she sighed. "He'll know you're just covering for me."

There were a long few seconds of silence. Harry shook his head – he didn't want to have this conversation, he didn't want to have to do this...

"I don't want to talk about this..."

"I know."

"It's not easy, you know," Harry said quietly. "I mean... I didn't think..."

"Yeah." Tonks' hair went navy as she got up and tugged her chair around the table to Harry's side.

"I could have helped with that."

Tonks gave him a frank look. "Harry, I'm an Auror, and I think I can say without exaggeration that I can carry a chair around a table."

"I get it."

"Cause, you know, I may have attempted to cast a Trip Jinx on Voldemort himself..."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. "Yeah, true enough."

Another few seconds passed, and Tonks' hand slid into his.

"He removed the charm or enchantment or whatever it was?" Harry asked quietly.

Tonks didn't meet his eyes. "Yeah, he did."

"Do you still hear that voice?"

"No, it's gone," Tonks said, shivering. "Dumbledore thinks that when we used simulamancy and then Sirius used that curse on me outside the Shrieking Shack, it caused the charm to break down and so I could... you know, hear it."

Harry closed his eyes against the tide of emotion in his gut. "I get it."

"But Dumbledore also said something else," Tonks continued, squeezing Harry's hand. "He also said that... that the charm didn't create things or subvert my free will or anything crazy like that. It just sort of... intensified things, if that makes any sense. He said that I wouldn't have heard anything if there hadn't been anything there."

Harry blinked, and he met Tonks' eyes. "I'm... I'm so sorry, Tonks. I should have figured it out, I should have known something was off. And when we were down in Gringotts, and I told you I loved you..."

This time Tonks closed her eyes. "Yeah... that. Harry, look –"

"It was wrong, I was using the fact there was a connection to get something," Harry whispered. "And then you find out the connection isn't even entirely real..."

"Oh, it was real, Harry," Tonks said with a sigh.

"I meant it, though."

Tonks didn't respond. She swallowed hard, and it looked like she was desperately trying to hold her composure.

"Do you..."

"It's not simple, Harry," Tonks said, putting her arm around Harry. "It never is on the best of days, and this..."

"Yeah."

"Don't get me wrong, there's something here," Tonks said kindly, "because I refuse to believe that magic was the sole factor behind us getting together. I mean, I'm an Auror – just because it was Dumbledore doesn't mean I give it up that easily."

Harry laughed quietly. "Yeah, true enough."

"But it's just..." Tonks raked a hand through her hair, which went very short and very blue. "I need to figure out what this means outside of the magic. There's always going to be some magic involved, thanks the simulamancy, but maybe... maybe there needs to be some time apart. We need to go forward, not look back."

"And what happens if we take that time," Harry asked sombrely, "and... well, you don't find anything there?"

"That could happen," Tonks said sadly, "but you know what? I really hope it doesn't. I hope that at the end of all this, I can come back and I can say that whatever Dumbledore did, it only made things better, not worse – but we need to know that for ourselves."

"But either way, if it happens... it's real, Harry. If we walk away and it doesn't work between us in the long run... maybe that's how it's supposed to work out. That's life. Maybe it just wasn't meant to happen – and in the end, that'll come from us, not any spell."

And then Tonks smiled, and Harry felt warmth grow in his stomach. "But maybe... look, you never know. If it makes you feel any better, I liked what we had, Harry – even if it was reinforced by magic, it was just... reinforcement. There's something here – we just need to figure out what that is."

They embraced, and Harry blinked as quickly as he could, to push the moisture away from his eyes.

"I... I'm going to miss you."

"Hey, you've got simulamancy," Tonks said wryly. "We'll see each other, don't worry. We just won't... well, you know."

Harry grinned. "I get it. And hey, at least from this point, we know it's all real. Nothing messing with you."

"Outside of the war, the rising threat of Voldemort, and the general insanity of my job?" Tonks winked, slapping Harry's knee and rising to her feet. "Don't bet on it, Potter."

"Anyway, it's getting dark," Harry said, getting up and picking up his cloak. "Walk up to the castle?"

"That path is icy as all hell," Tonks complained as she tugged on her cloak as Harry shoved open the door. "I'm going to spend half of our walk on my ass."

"Absolutely," Harry replied with a smile.

"You've gotten just as bad as I am, Potter."

"Just giving you some competition, Tonks. Nothing more, nothing less."

And with a laugh, they began the walk to the castle, the trail lit only by the light of their wands and the last rays of sunset, shining against the night.